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MARY McCARTHY, MARY GORDON,
AND THE IRISH-AMERICAN
LITERARY TRADITION

by

STACEY LEE DONOHUE

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

1995

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Abstract

MARY McCARTHY, MARY GORDON,
AND THE IRISH-AMERICAN LITERARY TRADITION

by

Stacey Lee Donohue

Advisor: Dr. Morris Dickstein

There is a distinct literary canon in the United States, composed of Irish-Catholic-American writers, which requires different modes of criticism or evaluation than other U.S. literatures, particularly the dominant, largely Protestant or Protestant-influenced, American literary canon. In addition, as a recently recognized literary tradition, many women writers have either been ignored or unnoticed because their works do not immediately fit into the evolving criteria of evaluation for the Irish-American literary tradition. My purpose in this study is not to survey the Irish-American literary canon, but to examine two women writers who have not always been admitted to an innately misogynistic Irish-Catholic tradition. Ironically, the dominant feminist literary tradition also does not know how to place Mary McCarthy and Mary Gordon (and perhaps other Irish-American women writers); feminists often are disturbed by a lurking conservatism in their works. Thus, both writers are doubly displaced. Through a cultural-religious-feminist analysis of their writings, I would like to reestablish McCarthy and Gordon within both the Irish-American literary tradition and the feminist literary tradition. In doing so, I will be addressing the following questions in an attempt to create new ways of evaluating Irish-American women's fiction: First, what is the Irish-American literary tradition and what are its criteria for

inclusion? How is an Irish heritage reflected in the writings of both male and female Irish-American writers? How is the writer's moral perspective shaped by an Irish-Catholic religious heritage? How does a woman writer navigate among often competing identities as an orthodox Catholic, culturally Irish, intellectual, feminist, woman writer to create a space for herself and her heroines? Does Gordon's feminism allow her heroines to transcend--to a degree--their fates? The dissertation makes use of current historical (Kirby Miller, Hasia Diner, William Shannon), cultural (Werner Sollors, Charles Fanning), religious (Paul Giles) and feminist literary criticism (including Carol Gilligan).

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Chapter One

Introduction

The Irish-Catholic-American sensibility is broad. James T. Farrell, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Eugene O'Neill, Mary McCarthy, Flannery O'Connor, Elizabeth Cullinan and Mary Gordon might not appear to have much in common, but they do. A particularly Irish brand of Catholicism hangs like a shroud. The humor is often dark, cruel, biting, and self-deprecating. The politics are generally liberal with paradoxical conservative views, or conservative with paradoxical liberal views. There is usually a conflict between the flesh and the intellect. The plot is often centered on family relationships and gatherings to illustrate their power on each character. There is often a self-loathing, similar to what we find in Jewish-American writers of this century; however, Irish-American writers combine this self-loathing with a distrust of free will that often results in a tragic, fatalistic outlook on life. There is an idealism that flourished despite years of colonization and emigrated along with millions of Irish men and women to the United States creating in their literature a disorienting sensibility of romanticism tinged with paradoxical fatalism.

Mary McCarthy (1912-1989) and Mary Gordon (1949) are two Irish-American writers, writing in the relatively unexplored Irish-American Literary tradition that is informed by an orthodox Catholicism. I certainly wouldn't want to limit them to that identity, however, especially when within their respective writings, each attempts to create an individual identity or integrate identities from a rich yet murky multilayering of cultural identities as Irish-American-Catholic-Women-Writers. Of course they are very different writers: Gordon is more satisfying aesthetically and emotionally, McCarthy intellectually. However both broke away from an anti-intellectual, puritanical Irish-American Catholic Church, though not before it left an indelible influence on both their writing and their moral sensibility. Both writers share the same sense of humor that arises from the hypocrisies--the gap--between illusion and reality, a gap they recognized in the Church when they were young teenagers. Both women succeeded intellectually and artistically despite personal

struggles with the Church's traditionally restrictive definition of women. McCarthy, in her fiction, was not as able to fully reject and replace this definition: her heroines are often foiled by their idealization of suffering and penance, and the desire to be seen as good girls. And without faith, their self-sacrifices are meaningless. Gordon's heroines, although they go through the same tension between the desire for the shelter and security of being a good girl, and the risk of loss (of community and identity) associated with the woman who wants to succeed intellectually and artistically, are able to break away to various degrees from the Church's potentially destructive image of women.

Mary Gordon, unlike McCarthy, embraces feminism, and even illustrates in her fiction a tension that interestingly anticipates Carol Gilligan's controversial study (In A Different Voice, 1982) in which Gilligan distinguishes between a feminine and masculine ("norm") ethic; Gordon portrays a Church whose morality is based not on Jesus' compassionate and situational ethic of care, but on an often abstract ethic of judgment; yet she then reveals the immaturity of an extreme ethic of care. Ultimately, it is only by integrating both ethics, (transformed into orthodox Catholicism and secular feminism in Gordon's fiction), that her heroines have a chance to take responsibility for their own lives. Gordon is able, perhaps because of her feminism, to revise both McCarthy and the Church's theology to allow for her other identities as a feminist and a novelist. She is also more willing to come to terms with Catholicism as an adult, and it is in her revisioning of the Church that she disturbs more traditional Catholic writers and critics. In both her fiction and her life, Gordon is searching for a way to accept the Church. She wrote that her "relation to the 'there' that is not there I make up each day, and it changes each day" ("Getting Here" 175).

Mary McCarthy, however, died full of anger at the Church that failed her: she wrote an unpublished essay assaulting Catholic education just a few years before her death, and refused a priest when she was in the hospital dying. As she promised in Memories: "For myself, I prefer not to play it safe, and I shall never send for a priest or recite an Act

of Contrition in my last moments" (Memories 27). McCarthy herself, as much as her writing, was the target of many Catholics who thought she had brought shame to the Church. In Gordon's second novel, The Company of Women, the heroine Felicitas brings McCarthy's book Vietnam to her first peace rally:

She had been warned against Mary McCarthy for years. Ever since The Group nuns had shaken their heads and breathed her name as a warning to the better students. "What good do all those brains do her? Four husbands and writing filth," they said. It was a comfort to have that book with her; she felt accompanied by a daring older sister whom defiance had made glamorous. (CW 90)

There is a distinct literary canon in the United States, composed of Irish-Catholic-American writers, which requires different modes of criticism or evaluation than other U.S. literatures, particularly the dominant, largely Protestant or Protestant-influenced American literary canon. In addition, as part of a recently recognized literary presence, many women writers have either been ignored because their works do not immediately fit into the evolving criteria of evaluation for the Irish-American literary tradition. My purpose in this study is not to survey the Irish-American literary canon, but to examine two women writers who have not always been admitted to an innately misogynistic Irish-Catholic tradition. Ironically, the dominant feminist literary tradition also does not know how to place McCarthy and Gordon (and perhaps other Irish-American women writers); feminists often are disturbed by a lurking conservatism in their works. Thus, both writers are doubly displaced. Through a cultural-religious-feminist analysis of their writings, I would like to reestablish McCarthy and Gordon within both the Irish-American literary tradition and the feminist literary tradition. In doing so, I will be addressing the following questions in an attempt to create new ways of evaluating Irish-American women's fiction: First, what is

the Irish-American literary tradition and what are its criteria for inclusion? How is an Irish heritage reflected in the writings of both male and female Irish-American writers? How is the writer's moral perspective shaped by an Irish-Catholic religious heritage? How does a woman writer navigate among often competing identities as an orthodox Catholic, culturally Irish, intellectual, feminist, woman writer to create a space for herself and her heroines? Does Gordon's feminism allow her heroines to transcend--to a degree--their fates?

I recognize that in any cultural analysis of literature, it is often necessary to make broad generalizations, especially in this study where I will examine trends--recurrent themes, characteristics and styles--that I will label as "Catholic" or "Irish." Yet by placing McCarthy and Gordon's fiction within a religious and cultural literary tradition I hope to shed new light on their fiction, and to create a renewed interest in their work. Mary Gordon herself provided me with the original idea in an essay she had published in the New York Times Book Review called "I Can't Stand Your Books," in which she decries the paucity of Irish-American Catholic artists, particularly women. She blames this on the Church's reductive definition of women, the immigrant Church's anti-intellectualism, and Irish Puritanism. There are, according to Gordon, only a handful of Irish-American women literary artists: Flannery O'Connor, Maureen Howard, and Elizabeth Cullinan. Her remarks encouraged me, as an Irish-American woman writer, to investigate further.

I chose to focus on McCarthy and Gordon because I have always seen a connection between them; I discovered both writers at the same time, and could not help making comparisons. Maureen Howard agrees: "She [Gordon] does not have anything like the easy wit and charm of Mary McCarthy about sex or politics; but what might prove infinitely more valuable to a writer of fiction is her fine fury with the false lessons of the past" ("Salvation" 32). And certainly many other critics have also paired their names. Gordon has also written reviews praising McCarthy's Occasional Prose and Cannibals and Missionaries (in fact, Gordon's was one of the few positive reviews of McCarthy's last novel).

Of course Gordon could inadvertently have left McCarthy out of the Irish-American women's literary "canon." She does not include herself. But these two writers must be included, for their art, and also because they represent, both in their lives and their works, the obstacles faced by and the influences bred into an orthodox Irish-Catholic girl who wants to write. Obviously I am limiting my scope, and some of the following ideas can be seen in Italian-American fiction in particular. But the Irish strain of Catholicism was unique because of its Jansenist influences, which were especially emphasized during the immigrant Church's assimilation into Protestant American society.

Irish-American Literary History

The Irish-American literary tradition is an Irish-Catholic tradition, based on mostly working class immigrants and those middle-class writers such as F. Scott Fitzgerald who still "had to contend with cultural obstacles and subtle issues of identity" (Casey, Criticism, x). Fitzgerald's fictional portraits of the Irish got progressively nastier, culminating in the downfall of Dick Diver. Many critics see Fitzgerald's main theme as the "moral failure of America's material success" (Fanning 238). I see McCarthy as writing in this tradition, especially by satirizing the bourgeoisie. The earliest writers in the 1820s-30s were mostly wealthy Irish immigrants who assimilated more readily to American culture, yet turned to the 18th-Century habit of satire, satirizing the American stereotypes of the Irish, as a response to their uneasy, yet successful positions in the New World. McCarthy perhaps used satire for this same reason.

There have been several recent book-length studies of the Irish-American literary tradition including Daniel Casey's Irish-American Fiction: Essays in Criticism (AMS Press, 1979) and Charles Fanning's very informative The Irish Voice in America: Irish-American Fiction from the 1760s to the 1980s (UP Kentucky, 1990). Fanning also has a book on 19th Century Irish-American writers (Exiles of Erin: Nineteenth Century Irish-American Fiction, Notre Dame, 1987). Margaret Connors and Bonnie Kimie Scott, the two

women critics in Casey's collection, wrote the only two essays on Irish women writers. Connors noted that there are few realistic portrayals of Irish women in fiction: the mother is dominant in the household, the daughter either obeys and suffers, or rebels and suffers from guilt forever. However this is not true of McCarthy's or Gordon's fiction where the mothers are sometimes absent (Meg and Isabel's mothers are dead), the mother figures have marginal power (except in Gordon's novel The Other Side that follows the more typical Irish-American immigrant themes), or there is an inferior mother-substitute, and although the "daughters" rebel from her image, the guilt, at least in Gordon's works, is usually overcome (Isabel pays to get rid of it). Scott points out that Irish-American women usually write about domestic, or private lives, and these lives are told from a girl's or woman's perspective: "They record Irish-American experiences in the changing world . . . " (qtd. in Casey 88). This is true of Memories, Final Payments and Company of Women, and of much fiction by women. These narrators observe and question the Irish predisposition toward bitterness, anger, and distancing one's self from one's own and other's emotions. As Flannery O'Connor (an Irish-American women writer who is the exception to Scott's rule) once said, "I come from a family where the only emotion respectable to show is irritation" (qtd in Gordon, "Habit" 44).

Fanning's study attempts to define an Irish-American literary tradition; and although I don't agree with many of his literary opinions, his historical information is fascinating. Like the noted historians of the Irish in America, William Shannon and Kirby Miller, Fanning juxtaposes historical information with contemporary literature. He notes the continuous subjects and themes in Irish-American fiction from the 1800s to the present, including weddings and wakes, dominant mothers, "lives affected by extremes of dissipation, abstinence, profligacy, and piety...the gift for humor and invective in public speech joined to an inability to express love and compassion in private" (3). The fiction of the 1850s-1900s was mostly sentimental, didactic, nostalgic myths of the Old Sod. The audience included Irish immigrants who were disillusioned in America. Mary Anne

Sadlier was a very popular and prolific writer of this type of fiction. Fanning recognizes both positive and negative lessons depicted in her novels: the positives include religious faith, ethnic pride and strong family and community ties. These are exactly the traits that helped the immigrant Irish assimilate and work toward the American Dream. Yet the negative traits--fatalism, anti-intellectualism, anti-democracy, anti-progress, and a desire for the patriarchal family and a hierarchical society--held many down (Fanning 140). The Catholic journals of the time preferred and thus disseminated this didactic fiction (with sentimental, romantic descriptions of Ireland) leading to the frequent complaint by critics and writers that there are few Irish-American literary artists.

Patricia Monaghan has issued a challenge to those who are involved in the relatively recent field of Irish-American literature: "A canon is forming in Irish-American literary studies. Who is to be taught in surveys of Irish America, who included in bibliographies? To whom are dissertations to be devoted, to whose work should journals pay mind?" (Monaghan 83). Her questions stem from the fact that much of the literature devoted to Irish-American writers not only focuses on male writers, but has been written or edited by male writers: Daniel Casey, Charles Fanning and Richard Rhodes. Of course there are women writers such as Patricia Monaghan, Sheila Conboy, Joyce Flynn and Ellen Skerrett who published essays in the Spring 1993 issue of MELUS devoted to Irish-American literature (though only 3 out of 11 essays dealt with Irish-American women writers), and the women contributors to Casey's first book. In examining McCarthy's and Gordon's fiction within the context of an Irish-American literary tradition, I am accepting Monaghan's challenge, but not without a recognition that although the tradition has been defined by men such as Charles Fanning and Daniel Casey using mostly male writers, much of what they have determined is relevant to writers of both genders. Yet in a study of McCarthy and Gordon, inevitably issues that are particularly related to Irish-Catholic-American women will become quickly apparent.

Mary McCarthy and Mary Gordon

Despite the difficulties of an orthodox Irish-Catholic upbringing, both McCarthy and Gordon were able to join the community of intellectuals and writers. Mary McCarthy was known as America's Woman of Letters (before being supplanted by Susan Sontag) and was part of the group of New York Intellectuals in the 30s and 40s. She wrote several novels, some more successful as fiction than others, literary and art criticism, theater reviews, essays on politics, popular culture and Catholicism, and three autobiographies. She also wrote still-famous travel narratives of Venice and Florence and reports on Vietnam. Whether or not they believe that her writing succeeds aesthetically, those who are drawn to her fiction and essays become passionately involved, tempted by ecclesiastical allusions, intellectual foreplay, beautifully constructed sentences and relentless honesty. In How I Grew McCarthy reveals herself, perhaps acknowledging the frequent criticism of her fiction as unemotional. After depicting a series of painful incidents with her Uncle Myers, she reserves the right to laugh at her past rather than falling into self-pity:

Laughter is the great antidote for self-pity, maybe a specific for the malady. Yet probably it does tend to dry one's feelings out a little, as if by exposing them to a vigorous wind...There is no dampness in my emotions, and some moisture, I think, is needed to produce the deeper, the tragic notes. (17)

Whatever her critics think of her as a fiction writer, many would not question her status as one of America's great intellectuals.

From the start of her career as a critic--biting theater reviews for the Partisan Review, book reviews for the Nation--to the beginning of her career as a novelist in 1942 with The Company She Keeps, McCarthy has been called heartless, lying, cold, savage, brutally honest and bitch. Her Vassar English teachers told her to stick to criticism, and

she did: McCarthy herself admitted in her 1987 autobiography How I Grew that when she wrote in anger, "[t]he aesthetic urge was secondary. I had 'something to say'" (101). In his own satiric portrayal of academic life, Pictures from an Institution (1952), Randall Jarrell's narrator describes the McCarthy character, Gertrude: "So her books analyzed (besides the sun, the moon, the starry heavens, and the moral order) the dew on the cobweb and the iridescence of Titania's wings; and they did not murder to dissect, but dissected to murder" (188).

The Company She Keeps (1942) is almost universally considered her best fictional work, although there are critics who prefer Groves of Academe (1952). The best-selling novel The Group (1963) was obviously the public's favorite choice. Memories of a Catholic Girlhood (1957), an autobiography with many fictional elements, is loved by both critics and the public; many readers have considered it and her other autobiographies as McCarthy's public confessions, in the tradition of Catholic confession. I would argue, however, that all her work is confessional, though none satisfy the requirement of penance--McCarthy enjoyed confessing too much. Louis Auchincloss, one critic who finds something to admire in all her work, wrote that "...in Memories she rises to a pitch of something like passion that makes it the noblest utterance that she has yet produced" (186). Although I agree that much of McCarthy's fiction is more concerned with presenting an idea from various points of view, rather than developing characters or telling a good tale, I find some pleasure in all her fiction. My favorite short work of McCarthy's is "Artists in Uniform" (1954) which was published in Harper's as a short story despite McCarthy's protest that it was autobiographical. Like Memories, the work succeeds as either fiction or essay, combining McCarthy's biting humor with her equally pungent and vivid observations.¹

¹ Carol Gelderman's 1988 Mary McCarthy: A Life is a detailed biography of McCarthy's life rather than the close literary analyses that dominate previous biographies. She recognizes the deep connection between McCarthy's life and her writer: "Hannah Arendt once told [McCarthy] that 'the discrepancy between public image and actual person is greater in your case than in any other I know of.' This biography attempts to probe that discrepancy" (xii-xiii). The most recent biography (1992) by Carol Brightman is by far the most extensive study of McCarthy: it is over 700 pages and took Brightman over ten years to write. Brightman

McCarthy was often attacked because she threatened others with her intelligence, wit, honesty. Paul Schleuter summarizes his sometimes insightful, often ill-conceived essay on McCarthy's writing as a "reflection of the Modern American Bitch. The best term to describe her particular approach to writing, however, is dissection" (54). And many members of the Catholic Church, including nuns and priests, attacked her in personal letters, as she notes in Memories. I like Ada Elizabeth Nealy's retort to their attacks in her unpublished dissertation on Catholic Girlhoods: "Christ himself mocked his slow disciples . . . and satirized the inconsistency of the forgiven debtor. His humor, of course, was not Christian, but Jewish..." (494). Both McCarthy and Gordon grew up with some Jewish influences: McCarthy's Grandmother Preston was Jewish; Gordon's father was Jewish before he converted to Catholicism. McCarthy confronts anti-semitism in "Artists in Uniform," created several Jewish characters (Sophie in Cannibals and Missionaries (1979) and Peter Levi in Birds of America (1971)), slept with, though never married, many Jewish men, and lived her life in the Jewish literary and intellectual milieu of New York City. Mary Gordon, although she admits to a very sheltered childhood where everyone was Catholic, attended and now teaches at Barnard College in New York City. And her father's concern with her education and scholarship when she was a very young girl, may be influenced by a Jewish respect for learning. I see this as another connection, and a reason why both writers were able to escape an orthodox Irish Catholic, anti-intellectual background.

There are many published critical essays on Mary Gordon's fiction; unlike McCarthy's, her fiction has been very popular with the public, and has attracted a broad readership. However, perhaps because she is a more contemporary writer (as Gordon herself has suggested) the essays are usually extended book reviews, (rather than the

has the most personal response to McCarthy and thus her biography and literary criticism is, to me, the most passionate and interesting to read. Although the biography covers much of what Gelderman discovered, Brightman alone emphasizes the Irish-Catholic and Protestant influences in both McCarthy's moral sensibility and writings. Brightman intertwines biography and literary criticism: "Mary McCarthy's work is unimaginable without her life, which fed it like a furnace of the gods" (xvi).

political, social, and literary essays McCarthy wrote), and only a handful of books and unpublished dissertations have chapters on Gordon. Harold Bloom's Chelsea House series announced an upcoming collection of essays on Gordon, but it has yet to appear. One Gordon fan, Ann-Janine Morey, is surprised by the "lack of interest by literary and religious scholars [and] other such guides to our religio-cultural landscape" in Gordon's fiction (1060). Much of the criticism of Gordon has praised her writing style yet denounced her "distorted generalities" (Fanning 30), and her creation of stereotypical Irish characters (McNeil 747). John Leonard acknowledges that Mary Gordon's portrayal of Irish Catholics made him face the coldness of Irishness that "I ought to know and wish I didn't" (655). Other Catholic critics respond very harshly to Gordon's fiction: James Wolcott (whose review of a Mary McCarthy work was just as unflattering) notes that her "Catholic imagery is used decoratively, for ticky-tack symbolism" (21); Brenda Becker complains of Company of Woman that "[h]ere again is a wilted flower of Catholic girlhood just aching for defloration at the hands of modernity" (29). Finally, the very conservative Carol Iannone is offended by Gordon's version of Catholicism, and writes that all Gordon is doing is replacing Catholic orthodoxy with feminist orthodoxy. But the much more thoughtful critical response of Marcia Seabury asserts that this is not true: Gordon's fiction always ends on an ambiguous note, feminism is not presented as the new orthodoxy, and there is "no easy, self-centered resolution" in her works (37).

Women and the Irish Catholic Church

The Church's view of women as servants to priests or God, as moral guardians and mothers, is well known even to non-Catholics. The choices offered to a young, intelligent, Catholic girl particularly before Vatican II were restricted (though some would say they continue to be restricted) to the Marys: Mary the Blessed Virgin; Mary the Blessed Mother; Mary Magdelene the witch who cured Jesus of evil spirits; Mary Magdelene the

prostitute; Martha, sister of Lazarus, the household drudge. There is also Mary, sister of Martha, who is acceptable as an intelligent woman, but only if her intellect is used to serve Jesus. Also, stories of female saints offer conflicting images of heroism and suffering. Both Gordon and McCarthy as young, intelligent girls read the stories of the saints and martyrs where the love of God is expressed through masochism: Agatha's breast is cut off; Catherine is broken at the wheel, and, of course, many were burned (see Rigney 43). McCarthy notes in her autobiography How I Grew that it was during Sunday Mass in Minneapolis that she was introduced to stories such as these: "Catholics had a great appetite for reading about gruesome diseases, especially those involving the rotting or falling off of parts of the body" (12). In Gordon's first novel, Final Payments (1978), Felicitas reads about a modern day masochist named Peggy who relinquishes her spot on the tennis team to read to the blind. In either case, a woman dies or kills off her ambitions to succeed in order to be a good girl, and show a love of God. (Perhaps this is why in both Memories of a Catholic Girlhood and Company of Women, the narrator's developing consciousness is connected with aborted attempts at sexual growth; the Irish were the only Catholic nation to adopt uncritically Rome's position on issues relating to sex.)

A Catholic school education simply reinforced the good girl image and with it, discouraged intellectual and artistic achievement. The Catholic Church in the United States is the Irish Catholic Church, an immigrant church that wanted, understandably, to assimilate as much as possible into American society. The Irish were ruled by the British, and America offered the opportunity all immigrants seek: political recognition, economic security, freedom of religion. To enable them to move into the middle class, the Irish Church in America encouraged its parishioners to seek practical careers, and thus the plethora of Irish cops, nurses, politicians, even journalists. But the Church gave no support to artists or novelists, who, very often, needed to transcend their experiences and the Church in order to recreate for the non-Catholic a vision that perhaps implicitly criticized the Church. Anita Gandolfo, in her 1992 book Testing the Faith: The New Catholic

Fiction in America, noted that the Irish-American Church has adopted a pre-modern fear of the imagination as a distortion of reality, rather than the modern view that saw art in terms of paradox, ambiguity, quest. Gordon has written extensively on this:

to think of oneself as a writer of literature, rather than a journalist or a popular writer, one must think of oneself as a citizen of a larger world...if one is going to think of oneself as a writer-artist, one must think of oneself as in the company of other great artists.
("I Can't Stand" 37)

The fear is that writers will not only create a false image, and leave the Church, but will think of themselves as greater than what they are, a sin in the eyes of both the Irish and a church that values community over individualism. When a young McCarthy won the prize for her essay on the Irish immigrants in America, her Uncle Myers beat her with a razor strap so that she would not get a big head.

Gordon has noted the false stereotypes of the Irish as garrulous, witty storytellers, when what she hears from her family is, "Don't tell anyone our secrets. Laugh and smile and lie." We see this philosophy in Joyce's Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man when Stephen Dedalus notes that "silence, exile and cunning" are the only way to survive, **as an Irish artist**. The history of the Irish supports this: first colonized by Roman Catholicism, then the British, then forced into exile where they were treated poorly, the Irish have been forced to adopt a victim's distrust of others, and a way of distancing themselves with humor and stories that deflect any real intimacy. Embedded in this self-preservation is the inability to see human life in any way other than tragic, or at least embattled: this leads to an attack on anyone who thinks they can step out of their place, who thinks they are better than the rest of human kind. McCarthy spent most of her adult life trying to learn the truth about her own parents--and I don't believe she ever did determine

whether or not her father was an irresponsible alcoholic. And she can't forget the "typically Irish" derision in her aunt Margaret's voice when the overzealous young Mary memorized everyone's parts in her first play. In Gordon's Final Payments, Isabel's mother-substitute, also named Margaret, decries the young girl's intellectual pretensions.

Obviously, in a closed society that treasures women only as mothers or saints, a woman who wants to write has even more obstacles than a man. When Irish women did tell stories, Gordon says the stories were linked to judgment: "they were correctives, proofs, signs that someone in the world thought too much of himself, the storyteller would show how...[Cam] understood the pleasures of judgment, the taste for condemnation... A racial trait, she guessed, of self-preserving Irish women" (Other Side 56-7). This was a self-preserving instinct no doubt, ensuring their continued dominance in the house and preparing their children for the worst--passing on a fatalism that clings. McCarthy wrote of her Grandmother McCarthy that "[t]he most trivial reminiscences received from her delivery and from the piety of the context a strongly monitory flavor; they inspired guilt and fear, and one searched uncomfortably for the moral in them, as in a dark and middling fable." Here, storytelling is pragmatism, not art. As the moral guardians in the family, women are permitted to tell stories only as correctives. Yet when Irish women write for the world at large, they may use this power of condemnation not only on themselves and others, but the Church itself, and there lies the problem. At a 1993 conference on Mary McCarthy, Mary Ann Caws said that McCarthy "had the bravery to draw a moral," and she did, although in some respects she had her Irish heritage to support her.

The influence of the Catholic Church is one bond between the two writers that I wish to explore. Mary McCarthy wrote little about growing up Catholic, but what she did write was explosive. In Memories of a Catholic Girlhood she details both the positive (education, love of beauty, Latin) and the negative (vulgarity, lies, hypocrisy) aspects of her Catholic education. Yet, although this is her only writing explicitly on the Church, not even a close reading of her fiction and essays is necessary to see the influence of

Catholicism in her writing and thinking: ecclesiastical allusions abound. And although she does not directly write about Catholics or the Church, in her strong sense of morality, of punishment, of self-criticism, McCarthy's sensibilities are clearly Catholic. There are also Catholic characters, such as Meg Sargent and her vulgar Aunt Clara in The Company She Keeps, where Meg's psyche is permanently damaged by her upbringing and she is caught between what Thelma Shinn defines as "two sets of values": the modern, intellectual, bohemian woman that she aspires to be, and the anti-modern woman, paralyzed by the "traditional values of feminine stereotypes and Catholic dogma in which she was raised" (91). McCarthy's heroines from Meg to Martha Sinnot to Kay in The Group all suffer from this tension, and it is never resolved.

Ironically, although McCarthy lived the life of a bohemian girl, sleeping with "over 100 men," drinking, traveling, writing, as she continued to write, it becomes increasingly clear that McCarthy, like the Church, was quite conservative. Although McCarthy outgrew Catholicism, as an adult she continuously tested and rejected what can be seen as twentieth century replacements for the authority and promises of religion such as communism and psychoanalysis. At age 14, she gets the priest to admit that there is a gap between belief and experience that cannot be filled with reason. This gap both disturbed and obsessed McCarthy: a quick glance at her novels and essays shows that her goal was to discover and reveal this gap in a variety of ideologies. She insisted yet doubted that reason could ever correct this discrepancy, and this tension is felt in her works. "Faith" by Catholic definition is a virtue that requires God's grace, not man's. McCarthy has written that The Group is a novel about the "loss of faith in technology" ("Contrary Mary" 46). With that word, she is, whether consciously or not, revealing the fatal flaw in belief in any man-created utopia: God's grace is absent.

McCarthy herself has suggested that it was because of her continuing position as outsider--the orphan in a rich family, the Catholic in a Protestant/Jewish household, the girl from out west at an elite Eastern college, the non-Jew among Jewish intellectuals--that

made her so quick to catch the lies one denies when embracing a role or group ideology. Paul Giles believes that McCarthy's need to believe in the infallibility of reason over faith is a direct result of her second introduction to Protestantism (her first, through the Lutheran Uncle Myers, was undoubtedly negative) through her secular Grandfather Preston, whose fairness and reason (she saw him as a Caesar) she contrasted with what she perceived as the more religious McCarthys' unfairness; in other words, according to Giles, the tension in her work is between a (perceived) rational Protestantism that believes in free will versus a fatalistic Irish-Catholicism that allows for a gap between faith and reason. Although the Roman Catholic Church's theology is based on the belief in free will, in practice, particularly when Catholicism has replaced a firmly fatalistic paganism, the idea of free will is questioned or even ignored. This distinction between a Protestant framework and a Catholic one, although it is a generalization, can be useful in attempting to analyze McCarthy's ambiguity. Also this lack of faith in any human creation or ideology that claims to transcend God's plans for mankind can also be seen as a pattern in Irish-American fiction, reflecting the precarious position of the immigrant Church in America, mediating between the immigrant desire to believe in the American Dream of material position and free will, and Rome's call for spiritual growth. As Charles Fanning notes, early Irish-American fiction lamented the false hope that America had promised Irish immigrants. The best-selling Irish-American novelist of the 19th century, Mary Sadlier, wrote novels exclusively designed to warn new immigrants about the dangers of accepting the American Dream uncritically, a sentiment also expressed in F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby, and the "Rogue's Gallery" chapter of The Company She Keeps.

As a result of her own lifelong self-examination, McCarthy's critical eye looked coldly on the bohemian, intellectual woman who toys with sex and politics as a form of escape, or as a shield from some essential truth about herself or the world around her. This is most evident with Meg in The Company She Keeps, Martha in A Charmed Life and the women in The Group. With each heroine, Catholicism plays a smaller role as

McCarthy grew further away from her Catholic girlhood, but since McCarthy portrayed herself in each of her heroines, all are effectively Catholic. And like herself, all are unable to choose between the traditional definitions of femininity, and the modern revisioning, a Catholic moral perspective and an Irish fatalism: Meg tries psychoanalysis but even her psychiatrist becomes terrified at the conclusion that Meg's Catholic childhood and her resulting problems as an adult suggested a mechanical universe; Martha's seemingly moral decision to have an abortion within an amoral community kills her; and the women of The Group all follow different but equally unappealing routes, while the book is structured fatalistically, beginning with Kay's wedding and ending with her wake (a common trope in Irish-American literature).

Mary Gordon's heroines also struggle with the modern world but their struggle is highlighted by the Church's acceptance rather than rejection of modernity (with the notorious exceptions of the role of women and the ban on birth control and abortion) leaving a blank where tradition used to be--McCarthy's heroines had an orthodox Church to break away from, Gordon's don't. Her heroines are disturbed by their luck, but not restricted by their fate. Gordon also broke from the Church at fourteen when she realized that the gap between the real world and her religious ideals was too large: in a humorous tale reminiscent of McCarthy, Gordon describes how she proselytized among her peers, warning them not to use the Lord's name in vain. But Gordon's break coincided with Vatican II, leaving a growing nostalgia that McCarthy never expressed. In fact, Gordon's latest work, The Rest of Life (1993), contains a novella that continues to detail her own conflicting emotions between the old world of the orthodox Church that had both good and bad points, but is now gone, and the modern world that is still foreign. Gordon creates heroines such as Isabel in Final Payments (1978), Felicitas in The Company of Women (1981), Cam in The Other Side (1989) who try to redefine the Church's definitions of faith, hope and love--the three Cardinal Virtues--in the modern world. They are unable to go backwards, yet are not comfortable leaving behind their

traditions completely. Gordon's heroines sometimes come to terms with the tensions, and attempt to integrate the Church's moral perspectives with their feminist perspectives.

There are several reasons why Gordon and McCarthy were able to escape the potential insularity of their sheltered Irish Catholic world (McCarthy noted that if her parents had lived, she would have become a Seattle matron playing golf at the Club). Neither was raised to fit traditional women's roles: McCarthy's mentors were her teachers, and her Grandmother Preston did not allow McCarthy to do any household work, including cooking, which the adult McCarthy loved; and Mary Gordon recognizes that she wasn't "brought up to marry. I was brought up to be a secular nun" (Keyishian 26). Another savior for both writers was their fathers. Both had influential fathers (and a grandfather for McCarthy) who gave them access to secular books and ideas allowing them to break away from the appeal of the Church, yet creating in them a need to replace the strong authoritative--male--figure whom they could please intellectually. The authority of men--lovers and fathers--often replaces the authority of the Church in their fiction. McCarthy's Meg Sargent from The Company She Keeps (1942) is attracted to older men like Frederick and the man in the Brooks Brothers shirt who admire her wit and intelligence, yet also want to keep them under their control. The same relationship is repeated with Martha and Miles in A Charmed Circle, and Kay and Harald in The Group. McCarthy herself once said in response to a question about women's liberation that she prefers a man who is superior to her (Gross 176). Many of Gordon's heroines, with some exceptions, are "daddy's girls" who are attracted to authoritative men: Isabel and her father, then Hugh; Felicitas and Father Cyprian, and then Robert; Anne Foster and her father; Paola, her father and Leo of The Rest of Life.²

Gordon's fiction both revises the Church and updates McCarthy because of her recognition of the nurturing community of women that supports a woman's search for a new, less restrictive, sense of identity and a more integrated morality. Informed by the

² Mary Gordon herself married a much older man.

feminist movement of the 1970s, Gordon painfully details her heroine's recognition of the risks and dangers involved in this search. Gordon's novels, like McCarthy's, portray a series of moral dilemmas that face the 20th century woman and reflect the dual nature of a Protestant-influenced, Catholic sensibility: spirit and body, good and evil, grace and guilt. And it is their Catholic sensibility that ultimately, despite Gordon's feminism, brings them both back to the tensions between their distrust of religious faith and the inability to find any modern replacements, a nostalgia, yet rebellion. It is their Catholic sensibility that forces them to deal with the issue of free will and determinism.

Much has been written about the passivity of McCarthy's heroines, particularly with the characters in The Group: Kay marries Harald even after she's realized that it is a mistake, Prissy meekly follows the medical advice of her physician-husband even though she recognizes the sadism inherent in his prescriptions. Yet McCarthy has pointed out that they are products of their time, unable to control their own destinies. Fate is alluded to often in the novel: Dottie's mother fears that "some dreadful pattern were being repeated in Dottie."; "It seemed that Libby's fate to start out strong with people then to have them lose interest."; Harald is doomed to repeat his father's professional failure. All the girls claim that the worst fate would be to end up like their bourgeois parents; yet their lives become even more restricted. McCarthy is responding to an Irish Catholic fatalism--all the characters have little control over their lives: they are fated to follow the failures of their parents, or the economic, educational, historical and social forces are simply too powerful for an individual to overcome. Remember Margaret Sargent's fear that because of her childhood, she is forever impaired on a psychological level, and the novel ends with her begging for consciousness of her fate, not for the means to overcome it.

Gordon's heroines also agonize over their fate, or luck, and feel the resulting guilt and overpowering sense of responsibility for those without their accident of birth. Isabel, Felicitas, Anne and Cam all make large, positive steps forward, despite an overshadowing ambiguity about their decisions. Felicitas, who was raised to be a female Jesus, decides

to marry to give her daughter an "ordinary" life, but she fears she is losing something for herself: "For a long time, I have taken pride in my life because I thought I had not just a life but a fate, and I was vain about accepting my fate in an age when most people didn't even acknowledge it" (Co of Women 251). Unlike McCarthy's heroines, Gordon's make decisions and at least attempt to transcend their fates; they take responsibility for redefining and recreating their lives: Isabel pays off Margaret with cash, instead of sacrificing her life; Felicitas retrenches, but feels that her daughter, Linda, will be more successful than herself in a world that doesn't fear fate.

Both McCarthy's and Gordon's heroines must overcome these tensions, create a new identity--both cultural and personal--and grow up, accepting the responsibility and risks of an autonomous existence. Or, like McCarthy's Martha, Kay and Sophie, they die.

Despite public opinion and Gordon's feminism, both she and McCarthy are ultimately conservative or reluctant radicals. Podhoretz wrote that McCarthy's heroines' conservatism "flows ultimately from an ineluctable skepticism about their own destinies by force of will and idea" (87). Gordon, more liberal on women's issues, and more optimistic (although guardedly) about the individual's ability to change, is still nostalgic for the values and traditions of the pre-Vatican II Church. In "Immaculate Man," a novella from The Rest of Life, the heroine is a secular woman, and a non-Catholic, who falls in love with a priest, and his orthodox, cloistered existence, from which she, by the very nature of their relationship, is taking him away.

As in the fiction of James Farrell, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Eugene O'Neill, and other Irish-American writers, the traditions and beliefs of Catholicism are often in conflict with their modern replacements. Fitzgerald's Dick Diver, the psychiatrist/priest, identified as Irish, though he is not Catholic, by several Fitzgerald characters, saves the Catholic Nicole only to be destroyed by her and her sister. McCarthy's Martha Sinnot aborts her child rather than succumb to the guilt of possibly having a child by her ex-husband--a sin in

her eyes, but not in the eyes of the community. Isabel Moore temporarily returns to Margaret as penance for her perceived sin of adultery. Ignoring contemporary cries of personal freedom, these characters respond to moral dilemmas with an outmoded, and perhaps distorted, Catholic sensibility.

Alienation from society, of course, is a modernist response to the fragmentation of modern life; yet for the Irish-Catholic writer, the results of these tensions are too often tragic. As different as Dick Diver is from Martha Sinnot, both sin, and both descend; fatalistically, they are foiled by a particularly Irish Catholic sensibility. Gordon's Isabel, however, floats back to the surface, with the help of her women friends, both ex-Catholics, and an alcoholic, and outcast priest, who reinterprets the Bible for her. While visiting her at Margaret's, he tells her to fix up her hair and lose weight:

"God gave you beauty. If you waste it, that's a sin against the fifth commandment."

"Thou shall not kill? What does that have to do with it?"

"It means slow deaths, too," he said. (FP 242)

Yet Isabel still needs the help of the Catholics she grew up with: Liz, Eleanor, the Catholic priest. Although all three have become outsiders, Isabel still needs that tentative connection to Catholicism to help her escape her fate. Like McCarthy, Gordon is also unable to fully reject her Catholic moral upbringing. Despite McCarthy's political, social, and intellectual radicalism, despite Gordon's active feminism, both writers continued to search for the reason that can fill the gap between belief and reason, for the balance between free will and determinism, for the ability to recreate the self without losing too much of the past.

The specific works will be examined within the context of the Irish-American literary tradition, where, as Sean O'Huiginn has written, the "treatment of certain recurring themes of Irish-American fiction are splinters of broken Irish traditions" and the writers have "created the 'conscience,' or at least recorded the experience of the Irish-American community" (x-xi). I see many connections between the two Irish-American women writers: both come from mixed religious heritages with a strong orthodox Catholic training, both had close relationships with their fathers that ended tragically, both are inclined toward moral fiction from a woman's perspective (even in McCarthy's Birds of America, her favorite novel, the male protagonist has a quest similar to Isabel's, although his takes him further from home). Their heroines are similar: they continuously scrutinize their thoughts and actions; they are insecure about their identity as intellectual women; and many of the heroines accept punishment by a figure in authority for some perceived sin. Gordon's heroines, however, are more successful at overcoming their fates.

This study is divided into seven chapters. After an overview of Irish history and immigration to the United States, and a discussion of the Irish-American literary tradition, *Chapter 2* examines the works of various Irish-American writers to illustrate the various ways in which Irish-American fiction can be read. Paul Giles suggests in his seminal study of Catholic literature, that it is in recognizing where Catholic values conflict with Protestant values that the literary critic can establish new criteria for evaluating works by Catholic writers.³ *Chapter 3* serves not only as an introduction to the lives and works of Mary McCarthy and Mary Gordon, but it is also where I examine the broad Irish-American themes within their works that firmly place them within this distinct tradition: the analogical imagination, contact with Protestant-American values, and fatalism. *Chapter 4* is a closer reading of the often overlooked Catholic themes, religious allusions, and moral sensibility in Mary McCarthy's fiction. *Chapter 5* is an examination of the tension between the sacred and the secular in Mary Gordon's fiction. As the heroines of McCarthy and

³ See Paul Giles' American Catholic Arts and Fictions: Culture, Ideology, Aesthetics. (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1992).

Gordon's fiction are essentially formed by their religious (as well as cultural) backgrounds, *Chapter 6* briefly details the contradictory positions and images of women throughout the Church's history and the parochial educational system that perpetuated these contradictions. However, despite the similarity in their cultural and religious backgrounds, Gordon's fiction is informed by a feminist consciousness that McCarthy rejected, a result, no doubt of their class and generational differences. As a result, Gordon's heroines reluctantly accept more personal freedom (and thus responsibility) than McCarthy's heroines who are trapped by circumstances beyond their control. I conclude in *Chapter 7* with a brief summary of the preceding chapters, as well as a recognition that the recent wave of Irish immigration to New York promises a new future for Irish-American literature, one whose themes and constructs may diverge greatly from their predecessors. A few paragraphs imagining this future completes this study.

Chapter Two

The Irish-American Literary Tradition

Introduction: Cultural Literary Criticism

Those who choose to examine literature from a cultural or religious perspective are conscious of the danger of essentialism: Is a cultural and religious influence in a writer's work inevitable? If so, one has to confront the problem of overgeneralizing what may be cultural stereotypes. Or, in acknowledging the author's authority as well as free will, is culture somehow consciously adopted? Werner Sollors, a cultural critic, questions the traditional concept of ethnicity as stable since ethnic groups within the United States are "part of the historical process...pliable and unstable" (xiv). He sees each ethnic group within the U.S. as defining itself in opposition to the dominant culture, and because of ongoing assimilation, the definition is constantly in flux. The traditional way of looking at ethnicity is that it is static where

each group yields an essential continuum of certain myths and traits...
[leading] to an isolationist, group-by-group approach that
emphasizes "authenticity" and cultural heritage within the individual,
somewhat idealized group--at the expense of more widely shared
historical conditions and cultural features, of dynamic interaction
and syncretism. (xiv)

He continues with a warning that ethnicity is a process, not a static list of cultural stereotypes.

Irish-Americans, an ethnic group that now has gained access to most of the power-arenas in the United States, and, especially compared to other white ethnic groups, seem to have assimilated: the predominately Irish-American neighborhoods in Brooklyn, for

example, are now gone, while Italian-American neighborhoods continue as they have for several generations. But it may be because of this assimilation that Irish-Americans work at seeing themselves as Irish, as Liam Kennedy suggests, “(select[ing] and interpret[ing]) history and reinvent[ing] the past in the process of self-definition” (71). In other words, ethnicity is a modern way of creating community, and that cultural “symbolism” is adopted to make the self-created community “appear more natural” (74). Literature is guilty of creating ethnic differences, through the use of cultural symbolism, to create a dialectic of Us versus Them, a way of disassociating the self from the other in order to define the self (see Sollors xiv-xv).

Although this alone is enough of a reason to examine literature through an analysis of cultural symbolism, there are those who disagree with the arguments made by Sollors and Kennedy. John Duffy Ibson, a cultural historian, argues that Irish ethnicity in the United States has not disappeared but has been repressed on the path to assimilation. Although the patterns of behavior that he terms “Irish” are not unique to Irish-Americans, “it is revealingly common among them” (xix). Psychiatrist Marcia McGoldrick, who has edited a famous study of the role of ethnicity in patients’ psychology, attempts to mitigate the arguments against divisive, cultural stereotyping: “Describing ethnic patterns necessitates using cultural stereotypes or simplified pictures of the culture...By no means is it meant to add to any tendency toward negative labeling or stereotyping of the Irish” (310). However, she continues by noting that the Irish do retain more cultural characteristics than other acculturated ethnic groups, according to a study by sociologist Andrew Greeley in 1981:

- (1) their assimilation did not require them to give up their language,
- (2) parochial schools run primarily by Irish nuns and priests transmitted Irish cultural values to generations of Irish-American children, and
- (3) Irish values, strongly influenced by many centuries of British

domination, permitted the Irish to assimilate without giving up their own deeply rooted culture. (McGoldrick 312)

In this analysis of Irish-American literature, I intend to adopt both views: ethnicity is constantly changing and is often dictated by a desire to form a community in a contemporary society where communities are dissolving. I also believe that it is human nature (consciously or not) to subscribe to a pattern, and that many behaviors can be predicted, particularly cultural behaviors. Thus, examining literature from a cultural lens can be valuable in understanding characters' motivations and actions. It is also useful as cultural criticism through an examination of how Irish-Catholic culture conflicts with Protestant-American culture. Literature has never been and will never be universal. One must understand the complexities of each cultural group one studies; for example, one would not teach Shakespeare without any background on the history and culture of England. In fact, there is an essay by anthropologist Laura Bohannan titled "Shakespeare in the Bush" (Natural History, August/September 1966), where she describes the reactions to her reading of Hamlet to members of the Tiv, a Nigerian tribe, as a test of whether the actions and moral values seen in Shakespeare's play are universally understood: in her humorous essay, she quickly finds that they are not. Cultural studies is essential to an understanding of not only the author's place and time, but also the reader's. I am not suggesting that a cultural understanding is all that is necessary for literary analysis, or that literature is culturally determined, thus ignoring the author's role as conscious, independent artist. Yet, I do believe cultural literary analysis is a recognition that we all write, literary critics included, within a cultural context that we may or may not be conscious of, and that a study of that cultural context can shed light on literary works.

Historical Background of the Irish in Ireland and America

“History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake,” says Stephen Dedalus in Ulysses. The history of the Irish, like the history of many oppressed, colonized people, has had great influence on the character, and thus literature, of the Irish in Ireland and abroad. Since 1169 Ireland has been occupied by an English army, and although since 1916 the British occupy only Northern Ireland, the effects of this colonization influenced the Irish character. William Shannon, the historian, romantically describes the romantic Irish character:

They mustered their aggressiveness, rolled and twisted their anger into a knot, and tried to hold on to what was theirs: their rights to the land, their family identity, their memories, their patterns of speech, their way of looking at the world. Rebellion had failed, social movement was blocked, individual talent brought no reward, social wrongs no relief, and appeals for understanding no quarter. Then let the outsiders, the government, the world be damned, and let each man look to his own and his family's interest. (9)

According to at least two famous studies of the history of Ireland, the three major influences of the Irish character are the long colonization by the British and the resulting oppressiveness by British-sponsored landlords, reliance on the land and the devastating results of the famines, and the Church.

The Catholic Church in Ireland, unlike the position of the Church in France, Italy and Spain, was poor and landless. Since most of the country was occupied by the Protestant British, the Catholic Church was just as downtrodden as the people it served. Yet it was a “fighting church” according to William Shannon, that stood by its people; its survival and continuity with the past despite historical defeat gave it great power in the eyes

of the Irish people. Every Irish mother wanted her son to be a priest, and the Church opened its door to them all. To be an Irish priest was to gain a power not generally available to most Irish Catholic men in Ireland.

The Church readily adapted to the historical situation of the Irish, but the Irish historical situation was ripe for what the Church had to offer. According to Shannon:

Its philosophy sketched an intellectual background for the primitive emotions prompted by the forces of nature. Its dogmas made sense out of the legacy of national defeat. Its Sacraments and rituals gave meaning to suffering. Its parish priests (if not always the highest clergy) sustained the fumbling efforts to awaken political consciousness and to organize counter weights to the landlords and government. (20)

The forces of nature, such as the wild oceans, the feckless potato farming, and the forces of politics, such as the defeat at the hands of the Romans and the British, were put into context by the Church, a context that made their suffering more meaningful. The local priests ran hedge schools where Irish children, denied an education by the British, were able to learn the basics. The priests ran interference with the Scottish and British landlords, and made the hellish life in Ireland bearable with promise of a better life in the afterlife.

Of course, as we know from James Joyce, and as Shannon suggests, the Church was not always so helpful to the Irish. In 1848, the Irish political hero, Daniel Parnell's chances of success were destroyed when the Church defaced his name because of his affair with a Mrs. O'Shea. And the priests, because they needed the financial support of the community, preached values that, although positive in the sense that it supported the Irish community, also ran counter to those values needed to overcome the capitalistic British: the emphasis was not on thrift, but generosity with money ("It is harder for a rich man to

get into the Kingdom of Heaven”). The priests had complete authority over the Irish people, often because they were more educated, if only slightly, and because it was through listening to them and following them that the Irish had a chance at heaven. As a result, the idea of individual autonomy, subscribed to by the British, and European Catholicism, was undermined by the Irish priests.

Unlike the politically powerful and wealthy European Catholic Churches, the Church in Ireland was isolated geographically. This allowed the Church to adjust to the historical condition of the Irish, but it also allowed a puritanism that was quite foreign to the European churches. Jansenism is a product of a 17th century bishop in Ypres, France named Cornelis Jansen, who believed that perfection on earth was not possible because humans lacked free will. The Vatican called Jansen’s theory heresy since the traditional Catholic Church bases most of their theology on the belief in free will. Yet, during the French Revolution, French priests were expelled from the country and they went to Ireland, bringing their Jansenistic beliefs with them to an Irish seminary at Maynooth. Jansenism was a perfect philosophy for the Irish people defeated by poverty and politics, and spread quickly.

Jansenists believe that man is “utterly depraved” and “dependent for salvation not on his own character and striving for good, but on the mysterious flow of God’s grace. Grace when it touches the human heart is irresistible, but it cannot be summoned by human will.” The Jansenists also distrusted all human desires and instincts, including, of course, sexual. “This grim doctrine is closely akin to Calvinism with its theory of the elect. In the eyes of Rome, Jansenism is heresy because it understates the importance of free will and robs the struggle for salvation of its moral sophistication and complexity” (Shannon 22).

Irish puritanism was not just the result of the influences of these French clerics. The Irish were no strangers to suffering and the grimness of life, and the Jansenist-Catholic philosophy of fatalism, evil and sin reflected what they experience on earth. The idea that

man had no will, as the Irish could not willfully overthrow the British, and that all human endeavor was for naught, as the Potato famines taught them, was as real to them as any organizing world view. As the Catholic Church evolved in Ireland, it took on much of the Jansenist beliefs, which were in many ways reflective of St. Augustine's strict dualistic theology; banned by the British, isolated from Europe, and enthralled by this grim theology, the Irish Catholic Church became much more rigid, authoritarian and puritanical than its European counterparts.

The pagan Celtic world view already offered a dualistic, tragic perspective that adapted well to the Jansenist Catholic Church. Ireland is no more than 70 miles from the ocean at any point, and, particularly before the late 18th century, the isolated farms, the cold, stormy weather, and the pounding of the harsh ocean created a fatalism in the Celtic imagination. Catholicism merely reinforced the fatalism, tradition, community and passivity of the Celts: "Even in the realm of behavior, Catholicism provides a framework which--while it intensifies personal responsibility to obey God's laws as interpreted by the church--limits the field of individuality" (Miller 116-7). And the Roman Catholic reliance on saints and icons to attract the illiterate and represent its theology also found a niche among the Irish. Saints, relics, rosaries, candles, holy water, and ritual closes the gap between the human and the divine, as well as the gap between the Celtic folk tales, magic, banshees and charms of the "supernatural world of good and evil forces" and Catholicism (Dolan 233-4). The illiterate, rural Irish (Catholics and Protestants) believed in fairies, witches and the evil eye, and found mystical significance in the physical (the land, the crops): "For example, livestock were considered linked to their owners in magical as well as practical ways: the animals' health and fertility were inseparable from those of the peasants" (Miller 72). The leap from a belief in the power of supernatural forces to the belief in the Transubstantiation is not that great. Instead of finding an explanation for the cruel randomness of life in Ireland in the supernatural, the explanation came from the Church. And in a land where the distinctions between the supernatural and the natural

were hazy, changes of seasons and transitions were sacred even before the Church taught the Seven Sacraments. Andrew Greeley notes that “Wakes, baptisms, and weddings are also regarded as traditional times when the primordial chaos threatens to rush in, bringing both good and evil spirits and heaven only knows what else” (The Irish Americans 39).

Shannon and Miller both believe that the Irish language, Gaelic, and even the Irish use of English reflect their particular history. The Irish use of blarney, or the “art of soft deception and the disingenuous oath which is not really an oath at all” comes from a way with dealing with the enemy while still adhering to one’s own beliefs (Miller 11). By the 1840s the Irish were forced to adopt English since Gaelic was no longer permitted to be taught openly (although it continued to be taught in the Hedge Schools). But even those who switched to English retained the grammatical structure of the old language. In English one would say “I met him on the road” where the “I” is active; in Gaelic one says, *Do casadh orm ar an mbothar e*, which literally means, “He was twisted on me on the road,” “indicating passive reception of a fated or chance encounter.” Even when forced to use English, the Irish speaker uses phrases such as “death came on him” or “there’s a dread on me” (rather than “I am afraid”) once again making the speaker the passive and non responsible recipient of an action or feeling (Miller 120-1). In addition, Gaelic poets relied on proverbs over original phrasing, proverbs that stressed continuity, anti-individuality, passivity and fate: “ ‘Holy and blessed is he who is patient’; ‘What is fated for me is hard to shun’; ‘Good fortune is better than rising early’; ‘There is nothing in the world but mist, and prosperity lasts but a short time’” (116).

In the 19th Century, two events greatly influenced the Irish: the Penal Codes (1695-1746) and the potato famines, the biggest one beginning in the harvest of 1845 is known as the Great Hunger. The Penal Codes were instituted by the British to force the Irish to adopt both the Protestant faith and the capitalist values of the industrializing England. The adopting of both offered the Irish a way out of poverty to a career and economic security. But, leaving the Catholic Church, the only church, they were taught,

where they could achieve salvation, and kowtowing to the British obviously required a rejection of one's self, family, community and one's history--a sign that the British had truly conquered the Irish. But the impact was just as hard on those who refused to give in. According to Shannon:

Those who did not [convert] cursed their fate. They saw the success in life they worked for and deserved denied them. Their very Irishness seemed a badge of inferiority. They developed a protective cynicism about honors and high position and the worldly ways of achieving them, but in the very act of denial these objectives took on an exaggerated importance. A man who deliberately rejects a prize or an opportunity naturally tends in retrospect to overvalue its significance, for in this way he dramatizes his own decision and builds a prop for his self-esteem. Whether they yielded or not, therefore, the minority of Irish for whom the problem existed developed an anxiety about status, a sensitivity about who sits above and blows the salt. (18-19)

The Penal Laws, which restricted all but the converted Irish from any mobility, including education and land ownership, and took away their language and attempted to take their religion, were the end product of over 600 years of slavery. The stereotypes of the Catholic Irish as communal, dependent, fatalistic, passive and premodern are based in historical, cultural and linguistical evidence, and the humiliation of the Penal Laws merely reinforced these stereotypes, and in effect prevented many Irish from participating in the industrialization and modernization that was going on in England.

From the summer of 1845 until the early 1850s, every harvest of potatoes, the sole crop for most Irish farmers, failed. The result was over a million deaths and 1.8 million

emigrants, mostly the rural poor, and mostly to the United States and Canada, although many also went to England. Kirby Miller's thesis is that the Irish did not voluntarily immigrate to America, but were forced to leave home by the Great Hunger of the 1840s, by the British Penal Laws and by the oppressive landlords who evicted Irish families throughout the famine years. Emigration to North America was considered exile by the majority of Irish for several reasons: 1. because in the 17th century, the British sent Catholics there as political prisoners, as well as prisoners, and often as slave laborers in the West Indies; and 2. because of the Celtic/Jansenist rejection of individual human action and adoption of a passive, fatalistic worldview. Emigration was not seen as a way to strike it rich in the New World but a forced, involuntary exile. Before a family member was about to leave, an "American wake" was held, a ceremony bemoaning the necessity to leave. "Political speeches, sermons, the popular press, and especially emigrants' songs and ballads combined familial, religious, and national themes to portray Ireland's departing children as banished rebels and sorrowful victims of ancient, continuing oppression" (Miller 129). Of course, there were those Irish who chose willingly to go, particularly women, who were doubly oppressed, and anglicized Irish. But on the whole, poverty and religious persecution combined with extreme poverty were the motivating factors. And they left their homeland with their fatalism bolstered by the Great Famine.

Protestant Irish had been immigrating to the U.S. since the 1700s, but the 1840s saw the first large wave of Catholic Irish immigrants, who, for the most part, were poorer, less educated, less skilled and more rural than their Protestant counterparts. Unlike other immigrants, the Irish knew English: they were the only immigrants other than the English who knew the language. But sentiment against them was also imported from England, and that, coupled with the innate American response against poor immigrants, led to much racism and prejudice. The Irish, when they could get jobs, ("No Irish Need Apply" was a common sign on advertisements), often had to compete with newly freed slaves and free blacks, and an antagonism grew between the two groups.

The Irish tended to settle in the east coast cities as soon as they reached America: Boston, New York, Bridgeport, Connecticut, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, were the most popular choices; although some went out west, and a few became millionaires during the California gold rush, most Irish immigrants refused to return to their farming skills, defeated by the potato blight. The rural Irish chose the burgeoning metropolitan areas of the east coast instead, adapting to the urban life just as the urban life was beginning to burst. Slums and ghettos developed, and even a shanty town in the upper west side of Central Park. The stereotype of the Irish as dirty and passive was again reconfirmed.

The Catholic Church in America was as powerless and poor as the Irish Church, and was as significant a presence. Once again, the Church needed to rely on its parishioners to support its existence, and most of its parishioners were German, Scandinavian and Irish. There was a power struggle between the groups, but because the Irish spoke English, they gained the most influence over the growth of the Catholic Church in the United States, particularly on the East Coast, while the Germans and Scandinavians took control in the midwest. The German church was as concerned with the preservation of German language and culture as it was with Catholicism, so their church appealed only to Germans. The immigrants pooled their money to build churches and parish schools in the neighborhood, which bound them even more firmly with the Church. William Shannon describes the immigrant Catholic Church:

Native converts and foreign travelers accustomed to the urbane tone and richly realized intellectual life of the Church in Europe regarded American Catholics as materialistic, parochial, and culturally impoverished. There was a measure of truth in these indictments, but they overlooked the context in which the American clergy and laity operated. The insistent need for physical expansion drained them of energy and focused attention narrowly on parish

concerns. (35)

Working class life for the average Irish immigrant required a narrow focus. Men worked for most of the day in the steel mines of Pittsburgh or creating the IND subway line in New York; women worked seven days a week as maids for the wealthy. They discovered that the Americans treated them as badly as the British. The only comfort was in the Church, or, for some, in alcohol. The stereotype of the Irish as heavy drinkers followed them from Ireland to the United States. In fact, studies have shown that the French drink more per capita than the Irish, and the Germans are more likely to become alcoholics, but somehow the myth was maintained. John Ibson believes that the myth became a self-fulfilling prophesy for the Irish in America and their descendants. In Ireland people drank, of course, but the heavy drinker was seen as natural as fairies; in America, the heavy drinker became the fat, bulbous nosed, dirty Paddy of the contemporary cartoons. The drinking patterns from rural Ireland worsened in the urban immigrant slums of America, and increased crime, violence, male desertion and insanity among the immigrant Irish (Miller 319).

The Church and other Catholic reformers tried promoting, as the British did in Ireland, American patriotism and capitalist values. Irish journalists and clergy denounced drunkenness and attempted to teach what were defined as the Protestant habits of "industry, thrift, sobriety and self-control" (Miller 333) The focus of reform was on Irish men, to help them assimilate into American culture. According to McDannell, the men were encouraged:

1. to participate regularly in Catholic rituals and associations, rather than the pubs;
2. to take leadership in domestic affairs, rather than desert both wife and children out of despair;
3. to moderate economic ambitions and not pursue wealth, which was the curse

of the Protestants; better to submit to God, and model oneself on St. Joseph by taking care of one's own family first. (21)

Of course, this advice, and others, particularly the last, comes directly from Ireland, the fear that success will corrupt, and the conservative focus on one's own first. But the Church was in effect offering contradictory messages: that the Irish can be like Americans if they changed their habits; that the Irish should see themselves as coming from a "martyr nation" akin to the Jews; that the Irish should not be passive when the Church was threatened:

To emigrants who failed to achieve "independence," the church offered spiritual consolation: sermons and textbooks idealized a medieval, hierarchical version of society compatible with peasant outlooks, a society in which poverty was part of God's plan, to be endured with patience and resignation; piety outweighed material attainments, themselves the results of chance and fate. (Miller 333)

In some ways, however, the Irish Jansenism that was imported into the American Catholic Church was consistent with the more Calvinist-Protestant values dominant in the United States: the inclination of man to be evil, belief in an objective moral order, the need to pray for God's grace, didacticism in art and politics. But, for the most part, the optimism that was growing in America along with modernization, was the opposite of the Catholic-Celtic world view that was inherently skeptical of the value of human autonomy. According to Paul Giles, strict Irish Jansenism had a more long-term and pervasive influence than "the Jesuits' emphasis on personal freedom and intellectual training of the human will" which only upper class American Catholics adopted (41). The Catholic Church in America, with its Irish Jansenist and Puritan strains, emphasized the sinfulness

of man, and the power of the Eucharist and Communion to redeem man of his sins; as a result, the Confession became a more frequent component of the rituals of the Church. In the 1860s through the 1920s priests complained that there would be lines of people in front of the confessionals. In the 1920s, when America itself, including second and third generation Irish, was enjoying all the sins that were previously denied them, such as free love and cigarettes, on Christmas Eve a priest could spend seven hours listening to confession .

Related to the idea that people are inherently sinful is the lack of faith in human goodness and progress, antithetical to the native American optimism and innocence of the 19th century, and the growing idea “that rational, acquisitive individuals could and should manipulate their environment to produce beneficent progress” (Miller 73). And of course the distrust of individual free will is out of place in a culture that emphasizes personal freedom and Reformation--the individual can triumph over fate. The Irish were defeated by Camillus, Caesar, the Ostrogoths, the Danes, the Saxons, the British--defeats that foreshadow their indifference to the 19th century ethic of success. Ironically, both the Irish immigrant and the native-born American were individualistic, believing that they must care for themselves and families first before the greater world, but there the similarity ends: for the Irish, family also meant community, and the community was more important than the individual. Ibson notes that Irish emigrants “entered a society also marked by individualism, but of the economically--not mystically--inspired sort. The difference proved crucial” (11). The Catholic ethic of self-renunciation makes worldly success impossible and practically evil. The expectation of defeat, coupled with the Celtic-Jansenist-Catholic distrust of material success resulted in, according nearly every Irish historian, an Irish ethic of failure; so even when individual Irish, especially in later generations, ambitiously strove to succeed in America, they had to reconcile their desire for success with cultural elements that were restricting them.

Paul Giles, however, notes that the dichotomy between Irish and American culture is based on false assumptions that were taken as fact because of human nature's need to have cultural myths. In many ways this echoes Werner Sollors who believes that cultural stereotypes are adopted and perpetuated as a way to maintain a separate identity in a slowly assimilating society. Giles notes that American society in the 19th century was clearly not a "homogenous Protestant establishment," but Protestant values were incorporated into the legal system of America and thus became the dominant values: "Thoreau's rebellious individualism...becomes an orthodox Constitutionally guaranteed form of behavior, while Catholic deference to authority comes to be seen as unorthodox an even threatening" (48). The Irish, as do many immigrants, also saw America as homogenous. Speaking specifically of James Farrell's fictional characters, Giles is also describing the essential conflict between the Irish emigrants and the "native" Americans: "They project a monolithic conception of WASP hegemony from within their own minds to explain away their material poverty and psychological insecurity" (163). Both the Irish and the Americans needed to rely on these stereotypes to support their own beliefs in themselves: the Americans needed to see the Irish fatalism and deference to authority as threatening to the American desire for human progress, and the Irish needed a conspiracy theory to explain away their continued defeat, even in the New World, by poverty and the dominant power. The Church supported this conflict by enforcing a hostility toward secular society as sinful and Protestants as heretics and infidels. Marrying a Protestant was seen as a threat to salvation for the Catholic and his or her offspring.

William Shannon describes the Irish emigrants as standing "at the opening of the twentieth century with a foot in each world. The desire the join the 'ins' conflicted with the desire to lead the 'outs.' The wish to climb socially ran counter to the impulse to champion the rebellious, restless poor" (145). Seeing themselves as victims of yet another powerful force, the Irish again banded together, either to build their neighborhood parishes and schools as a retreat from the Protestant world, or to fight for the moral and

political cause that they knew was right. The Irish romanticized the past in Ireland, and continued to do so in America. Ireland, the land of the blighted potato and the devastating Penal Laws became Erin, the golden land of rolling green hills and happy, not evil, leprechauns. Mary Gordon describes this seemingly paradoxical Irish romanticism in the face of fatalism, the defense of the underdog, the lost cause:

the posture of the mistaken defender is compelling to the spirit,
 whether its bent is classical or romantic. The Irish have always in the
 back of their eye the vision of the ideal. Therefore, they must always
 be failures. For it is impossible to live up to the ideal; but to be attracted to
 it, to keep it in the back of one's eye, to know that one's endeavors are,
 however successful, inevitably failures is to see the human condition in
 its clearest, most undiluted colors, to feel its starkest music in the bones.
 (Good Boys 207)

There is a contradiction inherent in the defense of the underdog despite a pessimistic outlook, but it is what has kept the Irish *Irish* after almost continual colonization.

The second and third generation Irish moved up the social and economic ladder rather quickly, relative to other non-English speaking immigrants, and despite cultural attitudes, although many studies show that the both second generation (from the Famine generation) blue and white collar Irish-Catholic men were more likely to remain in low manual work or did not rise as much as Protestants to high white collar jobs (Biddle 99). By the third generation, intermarriage was higher for the Irish than for other ethnic groups. Miller notes that according to contemporary surviving correspondence from the second generation, they "rarely maintained personal ties to Irish relatives" and quickly assimilated into American society, losing their cultural and historical identity as Irish (511). Miller

himself believes that this loss was devastating, while Shannon writes that there was no loss at all:

The members of each generation learn from their parents of the triumphs and griefs of their ancestors; they share in common experiences, repeat established rituals, adopt some of the models and aspirations of their parents, and their outlook on the present and the future is shaped by many influences from the past. (vii-viii)

If the generations of Irish after the famine generation seemed to succeed politically and socially, in some cases infiltrating the police and fire departments as well as the Democratic party, they were, according to Shannon, and others, still being held back by their families. Hasia Diner, in her study of Irish-American women, notes that the family patterns begun in Ireland have been carried over into the United States:

Still, there is considerable, fairly recent sociological data suggesting that the distinctive cultural traits of Irish-American women remain strong today, and I suggest in a limited way in this study how the traditional values of Irish-American women survived and changed in the twentieth century. In short, this is essentially a study of cultural persistence over time. (xvi)

The Irish-American Family

In Ireland, under the Penal Laws, the land owned or tenanted by a father had to be subdivided so that all the sons inherited the land equally: this was one way to limit the amount of property an individual Irish family could run or own. But when these laws were no longer enforced, farmers returned to the old rules of inheritance whereby only one

son would get the land owned or leased by the family (or one daughter if there were no sons). But there were no established rules as to which son would get the land, the oldest or youngest son did not automatically inherit his parents' property. The parents decided who would be the designated heir, and they made that decision, according to Diner, as late in their lives as possible: "[I]nterestingly, Ireland had among Europe's most impressive statistics on longevity[.] At the same time [the parents] held onto control of their children's futures" (10). Sons could not marry until they knew who got the land leading to many late marriages or life-long celibacy. Men were often referred to as "boy" or "lad" until the age of 40, an adult until age 60, middle-aged until 80, and old after that. Marriages were often arranged, and the bride with the largest dowry was usually the "winner" because her dowry was needed to support the remaining, landless, children. These landless children were free to choose their own partners, usually, but because they often had no money, they, too, would either marry late or not at all. In the 1950s New York, Mary Gordon's Irish uncle surprised the family by marrying at age 43 ("Houses" 35). Single daughters were encouraged to work to earn their own support, or if they were lucky, their own dowries.

Romantic love, both before and after the Famine, was not valued as much as economic security, not status or wealth, but the ability to maintain oneself or a family in a secure, non-risky, manner. Even once in the United States, men were encouraged to seek jobs with regular incomes and hours; the American middle-class disdain for manual labor was not a belief of first or second generation Irish-Americans (Biddle 114). Like the desire for economic security, the pain, risk and loss associated with romantic love was less valuable than a steady marriage partner. Although romantic love obviously existed, if we look at the poems and songs of post-Famine Ireland, they are tame compared to the French and even the British. And Irish songs "frequently superimposed a nationalistic theme on professions of love, almost as if to make them acceptable. Irish songs might have celebrated the beauty of Irish women, but always in order to contrast them with women of

other groups, providing yet another way to celebrate that which was distinctively Irish” (Diner 23). Even Irish dancing, usually jigs, allowed only the feet to move, not the body. Sex outside of the proscribed norm of marriage would have been seen as both sinful, and, more importantly, destructive to a highly rigid family structure. Illegitimacy in Ireland was quite rare, as was prostitution, and this strict sexual morality was retained in the United States, although urban poverty did lead to more prostitution (Diner 114).

Obviously there were the inevitable problems between the fathers and his noninheriting sons, and because inheriting sons often married women much younger than themselves, whom they probably didn’t love, the mother-son relationship was often exceptionally strong, “so much so that jealousy between mothers and their sons’ brides was proverbial” (Miller 57). But the noninheriting children rarely rebelled, as they were restricted by both external and internal expectations: in a family where only one son inherited, sibling rivalry had to be snuffed out or repressed. The noninheriting son or daughter was also constrained by a sense of inferiority from not being the chosen one, and from the way they were raised, bolstered by the Church, to be submissive to authority and tradition, and to avoid disgracing the family name. Family ties were important in a rural world that had to deal with the randomness of nature and the domination of the British. According to Miller,

Among the Catholic Irish especially, only family members were considered ‘friends’ (*cairde*), while nonrelated neighbors, regardless of intimacy, were merely “acquaintances” (*luchtaitheantais*). Whether an Irishman actually felt affection for particular kin was unimportant; intrafamilial strife was often endemic, but family members strove to present a united front to the outside world. Fierce family loyalties precluded objectivity in business, politics, or law...” (54)

Despite any intrafamilial strife, individual self-restraint was in the family's best interest, and the idea that the individual member needed to make sacrifices for the larger family is one that was difficult to reject in a society that valued conformity. Also, the family and the Church were the only social institutions available to the rural Irish Catholic, and one's identity was formed by both. Irish children who were frustrated were forced to repress those feelings in the name of familial harmony. According to historical, anecdotal and literary accounts, they often took solace in drink or in work or, in extreme instances, "children withdrew into a delusional world of schizophrenia (since the late nineteenth century Ireland has had one of the world's highest rates of schizophrenic disorder) instead of challenging parental prerogatives and upsetting the intricate web of duties and obligations" (Diner 15).

Immigration helped ease family relationships. However, Diner notes that in mid-twentieth century studies of Irish Catholic American family life, there is still a high degree of tension "produced by the confluence of female assertiveness within the framework of a culture that supposes male dominance, a high level of mutual disdain across gender lines, and a lack of social basis for male-female interaction" (59).¹ In Ireland, family duties, social events, and even church attendance were all sex and age segregated. Although a wife might occasionally work in the fields during harvest time, the spheres of influences for both sexes were clearly delineated: women controlled the house, men the farm. Men were in control of economic and marriage decisions. It is only in the United States that we get the stereotype of the controlling, bossy Irish matriarch. In the United States, the husband would often work long hours, often far away from home, giving the wife total control over the running of the house, expenses and the raising of the children. Also, in times of high unemployment, Irish women, married or not, were often more employable than men. Although most married women did not work outside the home, some had to,

¹ This tension is particularly evident in the fiction of McCarthy and Gordon.

and all women worked before marriage: late marriages for both Irish men and women continued in the New World, 35 years of age for men, 31 for women (compared with 26 for native born American men, and 21 for American women). The delayed marriages for Irish-Americans in the second and third generations continued, although not quite as late as first generation. Women were able to work as maids and earn a decent living, room and board included, for their 24 hour a day, 7 day a week labors, plus learn by osmosis the values of middle-class Americans.

Because of the high tension in a typical immigrant home due to poverty and a general antagonism between the sexes, coupled with alcohol abuse, immigrant Irish men and women often fought each other physically. Irish-American journalist Finley Peter Dunne, known for his Garrison Keillor-esque vignettes about the Irish in America, often referred to domestic violence:

“[W]on day [Malachai Duggan] had a fallin’ out with his wife, f’r the championship iv the Duggan family, an’ Malachai was winnin’ when Mrs. Duggan she r-run him into a clothes closet and shtood ga-ard at th’ dure like a sinthry. ‘Come out,’ says she, ‘an fight,’ she says, ‘ye Limerick buthermilk,’ she says. She come fr’m Waterford an’ her father was th’ best man with a stick in Ireland till he passed away to his repose iv pnoomony iv th’ lungs.” (qtd. in Fanning’s Mr. Dooley 164).

There is a paradox in the stereotype of the Irish as articulate and the sociological and psychological studies of Irish-American as having difficulty expressing their inner feelings. Sociologist Elizabeth Biddle reports that there are three speech patterns in the typical parish family: understatement, the put down and ridicule (113). And, according to ethnicity psychologist Marcia McGoldrick, “[e]xcept under the guise of wit, ridicule, sarcasm, or other indirect humorous expression, hostility in the family is generally dealt with by a silent

building up of resentments, culminating in cutting off the relationship, often without a word--a form of social excommunication..." (316). Andrew Greeley, in The Irish-Americans, connects the need to communicate by subtle cues in Irish families as the reason why many Irish-Americans become politically involved: they have developed the political skills necessary to read beneath the words. Mary Gordon described her parents' home as a "place so fragile and so tentative; we didn't have any margin for mistakes" ("Houses" 44), and like Mary McCarthy, the young Gordon was not told much about her father's death, or where all her old things were (McCarthy was not even told about her parents' deaths): "They were banished. Were they burned, sold, put upstairs...? I was afraid to ask" (45).

Irish-American children, for better or worse, were treated as children, kicked out of the house during adult talk, taught to be obedient, quiet, submissive. In her study of Irish-American families, McGoldrick noted that because the Irish in America brought with them their Jansenistic moral view that labeled people as either good or bad, strong or weak, children were often designated or labeled as "good," "bad," "smart," "pretty" and despite any evidence to the contrary, the label stuck (323). Irish-American parents continued in the second and even third generations to encourage their children to do well economically, but not so well that the fates are tempted: "Who do you think you are?" and "What will people say?" are repeated to warn the child that, based on an historically formed culture that may have long been forgotten, conformity is more valuable than individuality, and, out of the historical context, this merely undercut the child's self-confidence and creativity (see Greeley's That Most 190).

The stereotype of the Irish-American matriarch, like that of the Jewish, Italian and black matriarch, has some basis in truth. All three groups share a history of persecution, all three groups lived in the extremes of poverty where the men were forced to work away from home for most of the day, or, if they were unemployed, as in the case of many Irish and black men, they either deserted the family or stayed out drinking with the boys: the Irish father and husband often did both. In 1855, 18% of Irish household were headed by

women, which went down to 16% in 1875 (Biddle 101). “Jewish and Irish mothers might express their dominance in radically different emotional styles--one by feast, the other by famine--but their respective quantities of power in the home may be roughly the same” (Ibson 106). Irish-American mothers were considered, in keeping with the Victorian image of the woman of the house, the “civilizers” of the family, keeping men from drinking, saving the money, trying to push her children into the middle class. Often, she would kick her children out of the house to play if she found they were reading books, or simply “moping” about the house, and she encouraged them to take active careers, such as teacher, policeman, or priest (see Biddle). The Irish-American matriarch was responsible for keeping her children inside the Faith, and she was often blamed if they left the Church or missed mass. She watched her children with a sharp eye, and did not tolerate any disobedience. Mary Gordon’s Irish grandmother is similar to Mary McCarthy’s grandmother although they were a generation apart: both women took their power from their position in the house as moral guardians, confirmed by the Church, the “true faith.” Gordon writes:

My grandmother’s family believed that unlike the Jews, they stood on a high unapproachable plateau...And there they judged. They judged the false against the true, they distinguished the important from the trivial. They thought it was the Church that was their buckler and their shield, but they were wrong; it was that large, unyielding, unapproachable maternal body that had undergone so much. (“Houses” 38)

More than any other immigrant group, more single women came from Ireland; except for the Famine years, rarely more than 16% of the immigrants were married, and many of them were women; by the twentieth century, more single women than single men emigrated to the United States (see Biddle 97). The Catholic Church in the United States

was a safe haven and comfort for these immigrant women, and the rituals of the 19th century church emphasized values that were perceived as feminine: emotionalism, sentimentalism, docility were all expressed in the *de facto* theology² and in the crucifixes, statues, holy pictures and rosaries that symbolized belief. Many Irish-Catholic women's lives centered around the Church; in 1902, 73% of the church goers in New York City were women (Dolan 233). And like the Irish family, the Church was separated into male and female spheres. Only men voted in parish elections and acted as trustees, despite being a minority.

Irish and Irish-American Women

In her study, Erin's Daughters in America (Hopkins 1983), Hasia Diner has recognized that Irish-American women, despite their assertiveness and self-sufficiency, did not want to associate with the feminist movement, and Irish men were naturally threatened by feminists. Diner believes that feminist values were out of sync with Irish-Catholic cultural values. For one thing, most feminists were Protestants, sometimes virilently anti-Catholic, or anti-immigration, and many suffragists were middle-class. "The feminists dreamed of a world where gender differences would blur to a minimum. The Irish fiercely believed in a world where gender differences gave order, balance, and rationality to human relations" (Diner 148-9). Even Mother Jones dismissed feminist concerns as trivial in contrast to economic suffering at the hands of capitalism (Diner 151). In addition, the feminist movement was, and continues to be, involved in issues that are offensive to practicing, orthodox Catholics in particular: divorce, abortion, birth control and sexual freedom. The famous Irish-American birth control supporter, Margaret Sanger, did so not in the name of sexual freedom, but economics and sometimes racist population control. Ultimately, Irish-American women, although feminist in many ways,

² *De Facto* theology is a term used by Elizabeth Biddle to emphasize that the individual parish's theology, particularly during the early and mid-twentieth century, as taught to and understood by its member was not necessarily in keeping with Catholic doctrine issued from Rome. For example, the idea that missing mass is a mortal sin, up there with murder and theft.

rejected the organized feminist movement because of differences in religion, culture and class.

Yet Diner disagrees with Miller who believes that the Irish saw emigration as exile; for women, emigration was the only way toward independence, and many women moved to America more than willingly. For one thing, living in America even for only a few years, made her more attractive to those scarce, potential Irish husbands. In Ireland as in the United States, women and men lived in separate spheres and often did not even use first names with each other or in front of others, including their own children, referring to each other as "himself" and "herself" (Diner 16). And anthropologists in 1930 noted that in County Clare, women walked behind their men. Although emigration did help individual women, however, they did not move for themselves only, but to financially help the family left behind: "Their actions represented a commitment to Irish Catholic culture and its way of life. The move to America did not represent a search for a new identity, nor did it constitute a break with the past" (Diner xiv). Because women were encouraged to be economically independent, both in Ireland and the United States, they were assertive in most aspects of family life, and, in the United States at least, gained such power in the home that they were reluctant to give it up just because feminists devalued such relatively meager power.

Irish women immigrants were willing, unlike Italian or even German immigrants, to delay marriage and family in order to earn money. Thus they were able to work as live-in servants, in the first generation, and schoolteachers in the second, making these two professions almost synonymous with Irish women. Irish hired girls, despite the low status, low paying work, were even more powerful and stable in their household positions since there were no American and few other immigrant girls willing to do the work. Many Irish women moved from job to job with little trouble. In 1900, 60.5 % of all Irish-born women workers worked as domestics (Diner 89). They were paid better than factory girls, could save money on room and board, and were exposed to American, middle class

values, thus easing the acculturation process. Ironically, the fact that Irish women seemed to have to work in such a lowly position was seen as a symbol of Irish failure. However the work meshed with Irish culture--the desire for money, to live and work away from men, often with other Irish women. Their daughters became teachers and office workers; the former couldn't be married, and since the Irish continued to follow the delayed marriage pattern, teaching was a natural profession. As early as 1870, 20% of New York City schoolteachers were Irish women (Diner 93).

Some Irish women did work in the factories, however, and many were actively involved in the trade unions: Mary Harris Jones, aka "Mother Jones" was Irish-born, as was Elizabeth Gurley Flynn. Unlike Jones and Flynn, however, most immigrant Irish women were only concerned with earning a fair wage, and not with socialism, feminism, and larger social concerns.

Some Irish-born and Irish-American women became nuns, who were some of the freest women in nineteenth century America: self-supporting, educated, free from the dominance of husbands (though not of the limitations of the patriarchal church) (see Kenneally 42). Nuns were role models for many Irish-American girls, and they, too, embodied many Irish cultural values transplanted to America: they were relatively independent and they were celibate, in keeping with the celibacy of many Irish women who delayed married or didn't marry at all.³ According to Diner:

These orders of nuns, which attracted many Irish to their ranks, worked among Irish women in America and confirmed the Irish values that viewed as central a woman's economic function and that saw the salvation of souls and the eradication of poverty as inseparable goals. Importantly, in the vast literature written as reminiscence and record of the Sisters of Mercy

³ In her essay, "Nuns," Anna Quindlen writes of her childhood fascination with the nuns who were her teachers: "I suspect, deep down, that some of those women turned me into a feminist." In Living Out Loud (New York: Random House, 1988) 160-164.

and the Sisters of the Good Shepherd, the nuns did not see their purpose as preparing women to become good wives...Instead, they sought to make these immigrant women and their daughters economically self-sufficient as part of the mission to heighten their spirituality. (136)

The generalizations above about the Irish are centered on the famine generation up to the third, and perhaps fourth generation of the Irish in the United States. After Vatican II, and according to clinical studies of contemporary Irish-Americans, much of the rigidity of these definitions and types have diminished. Vatican II gave Catholics certain freedoms they didn't have before, and Irish-Catholics themselves moved away from the Church as they intermarried or adapted to American values. The following discussion of the Irish-American literary tradition will also focus on fiction that concerns Irish-Americans both before, during and immediately after Vatican II. Although Vatican II greatly influenced Irish-American literature, many similar themes that stem from the Irish historical context can be found in the literature from the mid 19th century to the present. And Irish-Catholicism has proven to be a barrier for those writers who choose to use their cultural-religious heritage in their art.

The Catholic Church and the Irish-American Artist

Mary Gordon has criticized the false stereotypes of the Irish as garrulous, witty story tellers when what she hears from her family is, "Don't tell anyone our secrets. Laugh and smile and lie." Echoing this, a character in Alice McDermott's At Weddings and Wakes reports that, according to her Irish-born grandmother, " 'I never heard of it until I got over here,' as if all such claims to Irish wit or lyricism were mere American hoax" (279). James Joyce confirms this in his Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man when Stephen Dedalus realizes that "silence, exile and cunning" are the only way to survive, as an Irish-Catholic artist. The history of the Irish supports this: first colonized by Roman

Catholicism, then the British, then forced into exile where they were treated poorly, the Irish, as have many oppressed groups, have had to adopt a victim's distrust of others, and a way of distancing themselves with humor and stories that deflect any real intimacy, a humor that, once outside the historical context, is seen as wit rather than a defense mechanism. Historian William Shannon reflects on the Irish wit:

It is a strange gift, this national capacity for satire and self-burlesque. Sometimes it was a destructive one. Unable to be king, the Irishman frequently settled for court jester, and poked fun at king, commoner, and himself. Too often, it has signified a fatal lack of self-confidence that leads to settling for something less than the highest success...(23)

McCarthy also reveals this in How I Grew, perhaps responding to the criticism that her writing is dry and unemotional. After depicting a series of painful incidents with her Uncle Myers, she reserves the right to laugh at her past rather than fall into self-pity: "Laughter is the great antidote for self-pity, maybe a specific for the malady. Yet probably it does tend to dry one's feelings out a little, as if by exposing them to a vigorous wind...There is no dampness in my emotions, and some moisture, I think, is needed to produce the deeper, the tragic notes" (17). From a social-psychological perspective, Marcia McGoldrick believes that the Irish reliance on humor to avoid intimacy is "often used to avoid responsibility for or closeness with others" (316).

Before 1750 the majority of Irish people spoke only Irish (Gaelic) and although most Catholics were illiterate as a result of the Penal Laws and rural poverty, (85% illiteracy in some counties according to Miller), it was not a cultural illiteracy; even the rural poor were quick witted and eloquent. They told long complicated stories, were very much concerned with Irish political and historical happenings, as well as their own long, complicated genealogies. Hereditary storytellers were called *Seanchaithe* and they passed

on cultural myths and family lineages. According to Miller, Gaelic speech is very poetic and often unwritable, as are most oral, preliterate languages (71). However, the Irish artist, whose work is even slightly anti-Catholic, has to defend herself. Censorship in Ireland is worse than in any other industrialized nation, and that coupled with the Church's "Index" leads to much suppression of ideas.

Irish Catholicism in America has historically discouraged intellectual and artistic achievement: keeping silent, as Joyce was painfully aware, emigrated with the Irish. Dolan gives a description of a typical 1960 Mass:

Mass was said in Latin, the priest faced the wall and prayed the prayers of the Mass silently and alone; occasionally the tinkle of a bell or the sound of the organ would break the spell of silence; the sanctuary, where the altar stood, was the holy of holies, and only clergy and authorized lay people would dare to enter; people knelt in reverent silence, separated from the altar by an imposing guardrail; they prayed the rosary, recited prayers, or followed the Mass in an English-language hand missal; no one except the priest was supposed to talk in church. (429)

The Catholic Church in the United States is an immigrant church that wanted to assimilate as much as possible into American society. Understandably. The Church, bolstered by the family, encouraged its parishioners to seek practical careers for a quick ascension into the middle class, and thus the plethora of Irish cops, nurses, politicians, and journalists. But the Church did not give support to artists and writers, who, by the very nature of their art, must transcend themselves and the Church in order to recreate their vision for the non-Catholic. Even the patron saint of writers, St. Francis de Sales, wrote religious meditations--not creative writing. According to Mary Gordon, "Free inquiry, free thought was something that might get you out of the neighborhood and you

might never come back again” (qtd in Berger 64). Another Catholic, Richard Rodriguez, describes this fear of free inquiry also:

The Baltimore Catechism taught me to trust the authority of the Church. That was the central lesson conveyed through the experience of memorizing hundreds of questions and answers. I learned an answer like, God made us to know, love, and serve Him in this life, and to be happy with Him in the next. The answer was memorized *along with* the questions (it belonged with the question), Why did God make us? I learned, in other words, the question and answer together. Beyond what the answer literally stated, two things were thus communicated. First, the existence of a question implies the existence of an answer. (There are no stray questions.) And second, that my questions about religion had answers. (The Church knows.) (88)

It wasn't until after World War II that intellectual life was brought to Catholicism with the publications of the Catholic publishers Sheed and Ward, and with the election of the intellectual yet still boyish John F. Kennedy. Shannon writes that “[a]lthough the Irish have produced men of letters and learning since the Dark Ages, and innumerable good teachers, neither the American Irish in their picture of themselves nor the popular folklore about the Irish gives much place to them as people who are important for what they do with their minds” (397). This is at a time when religion was reduced to laws and rituals, often separate from experience, at first in order to bring theology to immigrants, but then adopted as standard procedure. This is also in keeping with Irish Jansenism with its emphasis on morality. The Irish-American Church adopted a pre-modern fear of the imagination as a distortion of reality rather than the modern view that saw art in terms of paradox, ambiguity, quest. This fear stems partly from Genesis where Eve imagines that

she and Adam can be like Gods if they eat the fruit: her imagination gets her in trouble, and thus imagination is associated with evil; and the fear is that writers will not only create a false image of the Church, but will think of themselves as greater than what they are, a sin in the eyes of both the Irish and a church that values community over individuality. Remember what happened to the young Mary McCarthy when she won the prize for her essay on the Irish immigrants in America: she was beaten with a razor strap so that she would not get a big head. The church refused to accept literature that did not adhere to central myths, so the definition of the Catholic novel after the Civil War is one that is sentimental, religious, and didactic.

The immigrant Catholic Church was more concerned with pragmatic church building, helping the immigrants to assimilate, gaining power within the dominant Protestant culture, rather than in intellectualism, "culture" and "art" which were looked upon as "ornaments cultivated by aesthetes and snobs" (Curley 36). Flannery O'Connor blamed Catholic education, rather than the Church theology itself, for the dearth of creative, practicing, Catholic writers (Mystery 177). When Catholic University opened in 1889, there were no Irish-Catholic faculty members: six were foreign-born and two were American converts (Curley 36). The Jesuits, one branch of Catholicism that was more upper middle class and more intellectual than the immigrant Catholic parishes, started Holy Cross and Boston College, both in Boston, to compete with Harvard. But even there, alumni were encouraged to find jobs in business, law, insurance, real estate and stock brokerage.

The art, the language and the beauty of Catholicism is taught not for its own sake, but for the service of God: like any orthodox society, or closed community, the Catholic Church needs no description of itself, nor does it encourage the self-analysis and depiction required of those members who wish to write for a larger audience. There is a prayer to the Virgin Mary that is supposed to be said by students which not so subtly geared young Catholics away from a career as world artists:

Under thy patronage, Dear Mother, and invoking the mystery of thine immaculate conception, I desire to pursue my studies and my literary labors. I hereby solemnly declare that I am devoting myself to these studies chiefly to the following end: That I may the better contribute to the glory of God and to the spread of thy veneration among men. I pray thee, therefore, most loving mother, who art the seat of wisdom, to bless my labors in thy loving kindness...

(Gordon, Good Boys 171)

The Virgin Mary is the moral guardian, the mother, the storyteller through prayers, of students, warning them that knowledge must not be misused. The creative life for a Catholic is "to prepare his death in Christ" (Mayer 37), not for personal benefit nor for the world's enjoyment. According to another writer, it is a specifically *Irish-Catholicism* that distrusts art:

. . .the priests and nuns who--at Mount Saint Joseph, at Boston College High, at Cathedral, then at Boston College or Holy Cross--told their students that art and culture should be *as majorem Dei gloriam*, devoted to the greater glory of God. When art appeared to be otherwise devoted--as in the cases of Yeats (a Protestant) and Joyce (a lapsed Catholic)--then it was judged not to be art. To most immigrants, the best art was inspired by Catholicism and evoked a beautiful, if cursed, lost land: Ireland. (Shaun O'Connell 389)

In the United States there have been many Irish journalists, politicians and even popular novelists, but few who would count as artists. Mary Gordon believes that

to think of oneself as a writer of literature, rather than a journalist or a popular writer, one must think of oneself as a citizen of a larger world. By this I do not mean that one necessarily defines oneself as outside the smaller community--my own prejudice is that to lose the identification with the small community is to lose irreplaceable riches. But if one is going to think of oneself as a writer-artist, one must think of oneself as in the company of other great artists. ("I Can't Stand" 37)

The artist must leave the enclosed circle, the parish, and enter the dominant culture, and, necessarily, tell the world their secrets; she becomes a spy. And in many ways, a small, cloistered community like the Irish-American Catholic Church, with its own rituals, beliefs and language, is, according to Gordon, an "irresistible subject for fiction" (Good Boys 205). But, to become a world-writer, one must be an outsider not only in your own community, but in the world, where, according to Gordon, you are "always defining yourself as 'not Protestant,' and even 'not Jewish,' knowing that you somehow never had access to the real power..." (Cooper-Clark 271).

Despite this, many Catholic writers and scholars believe strongly, and I believe it is more than evident in their work, that there is a definable Catholic imagination. Whether or not the artist leaves the church when she comes of age, she is still informed by the stories and images of her childhood, particularly if she was raised in the pre-conciliar church. Public performances and rituals, the community feast-day celebrations bind Catholics together, creating, to this day, an apparently select, homogenous community, giving Catholics an identity within a dominant-Protestant society. Mary Gordon has written about how the drama of the Mass with its sights, smells, language, stories and music, influences her as a writer. James Joyce, despite his avowed atheism, used to secretly attend Masses because he admired the liturgical drama (Giles 11). A Catholic writer is not

one who necessarily continues to attend church and follow the rituals and restraints of Catholicism, but one whose imagination is indelibly filled with the stories and images of a particularly Irish-Catholicism.

The Literary Tradition

It is only recently that the Irish-American literary tradition has been recognized as a distinct entity with its own special qualities: certainly F. Scott Fitzgerald and Mary McCarthy would not have placed themselves within such a tradition. And perhaps it is only in retrospect that one can determine whether or not a work of art is defined by or defines its culture. What is required here, however, is a working definition or a set of criteria to determine which writers are part of this tradition. Clearly, Irish-Catholic antecedents are one criterion, thus Henry James, whose father was an Ulsterman (a Northern Protestant) would not be included; as a Ulsterman in Ireland, as a Protestant in New England, the James family did not experience any sense of being considered outsiders in either Ireland or the United States, and thus James' experiences would be quite different than F. Scott Fitzgerald's. Writers who have converted to Catholicism, such as Walker Percy and Katherine Anne Porter, would also not be included because they are not, to use the common phrase, cradle Catholics, steeped in imagery, language and theology of the Church from a young age. However, I do not believe that we should limit ourselves to only those Irish-Catholics who consciously record the experience of the Irish-American community, because, as Giles notes, "fictional art can show us where religious sensibility lingers and manifests itself in less obvious, even strange and unpredictable ways" (25). Economic and social class are also relevant: the working-class raised Farrell and Gordon, although very different, have a more conscious sense of the influence of Irish-Catholicism in their lives having been raised in nearly claustrophobic parishes, and middle-class writers such as Fitzgerald and even McCarthy who may not specifically forefront their backgrounds

but who still “had to contend with cultural obstacles and subtle issues of identity” (Casey, Essays x). Like most ethnic writing in the United States, two recurring themes include the cost of leaving one’s native land, and in later fiction, breaking away from the traditions transplanted to America. But there are other themes that are peculiar to Irish-American literature, even throughout the changing literary styles, from didacticism to modernism to realism: themes related to Irish history, the varied reception of the Irish by the “native” Americans, the influence of Catholicism, and a particularly Irish-Catholic stress on temperance, purity, guilt and fatalism.

The Irish-American literary tradition is an Irish-Catholic tradition, that began with the first wave of Irish immigrants in the 18th century and has continued today, “the most extended continuous corpus of literature by members of a single American ethnic group available to us” (Fanning, Exiles 1). In the 1820s and 30s, clearly rooted in the 18th century satire of Jonathan Swift and other Irish writers, there emerged in the United States what Fanning called “the first recognizable pattern of Irish response to American immigration” (37). Unlike the famine generation writers that followed, these first immigrants to the United States were generally received with indifference more than hostility, and because there were so few of them, they were able to assimilate more quickly. Granted, the British had exported an anti-Irishness that was seen in American newspapers and magazines in the form of Irish stereotypes: the alcoholic, baboon-like figure who cries in his beer while singing a ditty, for example. These early writers, usually educated and middle class themselves, used satire and parody to combat these stereotypes, mocking the Americans for believing such nonsense.

However, by the time the poor, rural Catholic famine generation arrived in the United States from Ireland, with their hostile reception by most Americans, they chose to address their fiction to their own kind--other Irish immigrants, dismissing satire as just too cruel for a people so constantly humiliated. The fiction turned serious and didactic,

providing pragmatic advice for the newcomers on how to survive in Protestant America.

Fanning writes:

So it was that in a matter of a few years the fictional norm was overturned: from satired critique of propaganda to propaganda itself, from parody of fictional conventions that have been manipulated for extra literary purposes to the humorless embrace of those same conventions--sentimental rhetoric, stereotyped characters, simplistic conflicts, and moralizing themes. (Exiles 14)

The overriding themes of this didactic fiction, often in the form of domestic novels, or fallen women novels, were related to the struggle between good and evil in the New World (usually ending with a death scene, sad for the good, righteous for the bad), how to become economically secure without losing your faith, the Church, the power of the Irish mother, and nostalgia for Ireland. Some of the titles emphasize these themes, as well as the dualistic world view inherent in them: The Cross and the Shamrock; or, How to Defend the Faith (1853) by Father Hugh Quigley (a popular writer, much like Father Andrew Greeley is today, but without the sex); The Lost Rosary; or, Our Irish Girls, Their Trials, Temptations, and Triumphs (1870) by Peter McCorry; Annie Reilly; or The Fortunes of an Irish Girl in New York (1873) by John McElgun. One of the most popular women writers of this period, was Mrs. Mary Anne (Madden) Sadlier. She wrote dozens of novels, all best sellers within the Irish immigrant community. One, The Blakes and the Flanagans (1855) is about two families, the bad, secular, money-hungry Blakes, versus the good, religious, kindly Flanagans. The Blake children become successful economically in America, but morally they are lost, eventually leaving their parents and converting to Protestantism, while the Flanagan children stay at home and care for the parents, continuing their duties to both home and church.

As early as 1850, the famine-generation authors were helped by the establishment of Irish-American Catholic publishing houses that disseminated Irish and Irish-American fiction and essays, as well as those contemporary Irish-American periodicals that helped the new immigrant community: Pilot, Irish World, Enterprise, and Tablet all published fiction. The magazines and presses also published folklore, myths and poetry from Ireland, as well as articles about Irish-Celtic history. By the late nineteenth century in America Celtic revivalism continued to encourage the sentimentalism toward Ireland in Irish-American fiction.

Not all Irish-American journalists, however, supported the trendy grim, moralistic didacticism in fiction. Chicago journalist and American-born of Irish parents, Finley Peter Dunne created Martin Dooley in the 1890s, a bachelor saloon keeper. His sketches, written in pure Irish dialect, satirized almost every aspect of Irish life in America, including drinking policemen and cheating local politicians. For example, the following sketch attacked, at the same time, the anniversary of the Chicago fire, the corrupt Chicago financier, Charles T. Yerkes, and the American fear that the Irish immigrants would spread cholera: "We've had many other misfortunes an' they're not cillybrated. Why don't we have a band out an' illuminated sthreet cars f'r to commimerate th' day that Yerkuss came to Chicago. An' there's cholera? What's the matter with cholera?" (qtd in Shannon 146). According to Shannon, Mr. Dooley's satiric attacks were contradictory, much like the Irish-American and Irish immigrant readers: on the one hand, they "affirmed the middle-class American values of individual effort and economic and cultural aspiration," yet they also reflected Irish historical and religious belief that individuals are doomed to a life of repetitive suffering and defeat, "and a conviction about the vanity of human wishes" (149). Like other Irish immigrants and Irish-Americans, Dunne had no faith in the power of politics to create lasting social reform; politics was a way to earn money, just like any job, and the corruptness of men like the wealthy Yerkes merely confirmed this.

Other Irish-American journalists in the late nineteenth century, particularly the first Irish-American literary roundtable at the Pilot in New England, continued to nurture the didactic and sentimental fiction even in the face of a changing literary climate in the United States. Those who preferred the romantic fiction did so at a time when Celtic literature and awareness was being revived, with its belief that humans are doomed and modern life is mundane, and its romanticization of life in Ireland, so their defense was in many ways a cultural one against the growing new realism of American literature. By the 1880s, there were two types of Irish-American fiction: another wave of the propaganda aimed at the rising Irish-American middle class, and another strand of realistic fiction, including Henry Keenan's The Aliens (1886), about the prejudices faced by famine immigrants in Rochester, New York; James W. Sullivan's Tenement Tales of New York (1895) about a child, "Slob Murphy," living in the slums; Kate McPhelim Cleary's The Stepmother (1901) about the lonely experiences of an Irish immigrant in Nebraska; Harvey J. O'Higgins' The Exiles (1906) about the harsh life of New York City servant girls; and the best-selling Lalor's Maples (1901) by Pilot editor Katherine Conway which "charts the material rise and moral fall of a Rochester builder's family by focusing on the house that symbolizes their success" (Fanning, Exiles 178), combining elements of both propaganda and realism.

The distinctions between the melodramatic fiction and the new realistic fiction are obvious; but the success of realistic and even naturalistic fiction by Irish-Americans also signaled a return to the religious and cultural values of the Irish. In the didactic fiction, distrust of economic and social success is still apparent: the characters who choose to be swayed by material goods, disregarding the Catholic values they were raised with, are responsible for their choices, and, usually, punished in some way. The naturalistic fiction, on the other hand, while still distrusting human achievement, took the blame away from the characters and placed it on forces beyond their control, usually on their natural inclination toward evil, the materialistic American society, or even God's will.

By the early twentieth century, Irish-American writers, those who chose to write rather than take the more pragmatic career path encouraged by both family and church, moved away from the focus on "Irish-American cultural self-consciousness" (Fanning, Exiles 238). The Irish Revolution of 1916 had failed, World War I made them feel more American, immigration quotas stopped the flood of newer Irish immigration, and then the Depression came along. Irish-Catholic writers such as Kate Chopin, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway and John O'Hara were and are considered part of the mainstream American literary community, influenced as much by the broader currents of naturalism and modernism as by their cultural heritage. These writers were a few generations removed from their immigrant roots, and safely ensconced in the middle-class. It wasn't until James Farrell published his Studs Trilogy that the Irish-American experience was again the subject of fiction.

Whether or not their subject matter is specifically on cultural and religious issues is, however, not important in determining which works or writers should be considered part of the tradition. As Wilfred Sheed dryly recognized, "a Catholic novelist need never mention Catholics. You can recognize the sensibility" (qtd. in Cryer 21). Paul Giles has picked up on this intrinsic difference between Catholic and Protestant writers. He believes that the dominant trend in American literature, a trend that mostly defines the canon of American literature, is a "mythical 'mainstream' of Protestant romanticism" as seen in the works of Emerson, Thoreau, Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, Twain, James, Faulkner, and even Ellison: "Thoreau's kind of romanticism, with its emphasis upon individualism and escape from established authority, can be seen to emerge in a direct line from the Puritan temper of the early settlers" (25, 47). Giles' thesis is that fiction that is heavily influenced by a Catholic cultural, not theological, heritage has been ignored or obscured because it does not fit into this romanticism or pastoralism, because it "rejects the traditional American equation of intellectualism with 'questioning' or 'nonconformity'" (52). Examining almost entirely male Protestant and Catholic writers, a flaw in his survey that does not entirely

destroy it, Giles admits that the conflict between freedom and determinism is not unique to Catholic writers; however, in writers such as Dreiser, O'Neill, Farrell and Fitzgerald, determinism is seen in the often self-conscious need for social conformity, confirmed by both the ethnic and religious communities. Characters in their fictions often blindly accept the path toward achievement associated with the American Dream, while not truly believing in the individual's power to transcend: "The Horatio Alger game is accepted, but the premises upon which that game is constructed are inverted. This is why Dreiser, like Farrell and Fitzgerald, comes so close to parodying the American Dream" (152). The Catholic Church found itself in the contradictory position of supporting capitalism, while having to also back labor movements to help immigrant Catholics assimilate, causing many to see the Church as "subversive and unAmerican" (Giles 141). Catholic writers thus often represent this contradictory position in their fiction.

Sean O'Faolain has attempted to understand the contradictions and recurring themes in both Irish and Irish-American fiction as echoing often ancient Irish traditions and history:

The Celt's sense of the otherworld has dominated his imagination and affected his literature from the beginning. So I see him at any rate struggling through century after century, with his imaginative domination, seeking for a synthesis between dream and reality, aspiration and experience, a shrewd knowledge of the world and a strange reluctance to cope with it, and a tendency always to find the balance not in an intellectual synthesis but in the rhythm of a perpetual emotional oscillation. (qtd. in Ibson 126)

The need to accept contradictions is just one theme in Irish-American fiction. There are historical reasons for this inability to feel wholly integrated, from the Jansenist religious dichotomies to the colonization of Ireland to the relatively quick assimilation into American

culture. The gap between dream and reality is depicted in almost all Irish-American fiction, whether the ostensible setting is the Church, the political arena, the pub or the family: the small, isolated settings are important for creating a pattern of tragically divided characters, for emphasizing the conflicts with the dominant American culture, and for satire, a product of Irish humor and any fiction that attempts to undercut false beliefs or ideals. Although several Catholic writers such as O'Neill, Farrell and McCarthy flirted with communism, Catholic writers tend to be wary of any progressive, optimistic ideology. The political novels of Mary McCarthy (The Oasis (1950)) and John O'Hara and Edwin O'Connor (The Last Hurrah (1956) and All in the Family (1966)) portray politicians and utopists as self-deceiving and corrupt. The spiritual and moral emptiness of the Church is another target for many writers such as Edwin O'Connor and Mary McCarthy (Memories of a Catholic Girlhood (1957)), James T. Farrell, J. F. Powers (Morte D'Arthur (1956)), Elizabeth Cullinan (House of Gold (1970)), and Mary Gordon; having succumbed to the political and capitalistic values of America, the Church no longer provides the needed spiritual sustenance.

But by far the most popular setting for Irish-American fiction is the family. Mary Sadlier's domestic fiction, Eugene O'Neill's *Tyrones*, James T. Farrell's *Lonigans and Ryans*, Mary Doyle Curran's *O'Connors*, Elizabeth Cullinan's *Devlins*, and Mary Gordon's *MacNamaras*: the Irish Catholic family in all its claustrophobic coldness, has been blamed for a host of emotional and personal problems. Pete Hamill's autobiography, A Drinking Life (1994), blames his family for his alcoholism, while Mary McCarthy blames her family for its parochialism. Andrew Greeley believes that "[t]he images of the cold, stern, demanding mother...and the weak, heavy-drinking, sexually incompetent father have become part of the mythology of [Irish] American life" (The Irish-Americans, 149). According to Robert Rhodes "[r]eaders of Irish fiction will have discovered that both the mother-son and father-son kinships are particularly important in delineating Irish family relationships" (he cites A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man and Long Day's

Journey) ("Politics" 50), while Charles Fanning recognizes the recurrence of the theme of "the dominant mother in her fortress house" (3). It is fair to say that the dysfunctional family is often the subject of much Irish-American fiction: the characters restrict their definitions of self to their position in the family, which is itself shaped by historical, cultural and religious systems that are ill-suited to 20th century America. Rhodes, of course, neglects the fiction of Curran, Cullinan, McCarthy and Gordon in his remark, where the father-daughter, mother-daughter relationship is revealed, but, for the most part, fiction dealing with the Irish-American family often relies on these patterns and relationships. Although of course there are overlaps with other fiction about ethnic families in America (Jewish, Asian and Italian families also have strong mother figures, and generational warfare is the subject of much of the fiction from this group), the consistency of this portrayal in Irish-American fiction since the 19th century is of interest.

Irish-American Women Writers

From an historical rather than a purely literary perspective, William Shannon remarks that

Studs is one of the major fictional creations of the twentieth century. Few college-educated Irish Catholics reach manhood without making his acquaintance twice, once in life and once in the pages of Farrell's novel. It is a book--Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man is another--that has become part of a young Irishman's coming of age. (254)

Writing in 1963, Shannon is not fully responsible for the sexism in his remark, but now it is 1995 and the following question is still to be debated: Is there a comparable book for Irish and Irish-American women?

The usual "list" of Irish-American writers, in studies by Daniel Casey, Robert Rhodes, Charles Fanning⁴, and Paul Giles, goes something like this: Fitzgerald, O'Neill, Farrell, Edwin O'Connor, John O'Hara, J.F. Powers, Flannery O'Connor, Jimmy Breslin, Pete Hamill, J.P. Donleavy, Jon Hassler, and Tom McHale. Some of these writers are not literary, but journalistic, and, of course, Flannery O'Connor is usually the only woman writer mentioned. Occasionally I've seen lists that mention Elizabeth Cullinan, and even rarer, Mary McCarthy. Some list the *German-American* writer Betty Smith because of her treatment of Irish-American girls such as *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. Mary Gordon, herself often left out of these lists, gives the names of only two Catholic, Irish-American women whom she considers literary writers: Elizabeth Cullinan and Maureen Howard.

In a society that treasures the role of women as either serving God or ruling the family, a woman who wants to write faces even more obstacles than men. When Irish women did tell stories, Gordon says they were linked to judgment, "they were correctives, proofs, signs that someone in the world thought too much of himself, the storyteller would show how...[Cam] understood the pleasures of judgment, the taste for condemnation...A racial trait, she guessed, of self-preserving Irish women" (*Other Side* 56-6). Storytelling is useful, and not for art's sake. As the moral guardians in the family, women are permitted to tell a story only as a corrective. McCarthy describes her Irish grandmother's tales as "having a strong monitory tone like a dark and middling fable." Yet when Irish women write for the world at large, they may use this power of condemnation not only on themselves and others, but on the Church itself, and there lies the problem.

Of course Irish-American women have written fiction since the mid-nineteenth century, often commercially successful, mostly sentimental fiction in the late-Victorian mode, combined with "Catholic piety, [and] Irish nationalism": Louise Imogene Guiney,

⁴ Charles Fanning does, however, acknowledge several nineteenth-century Irish-American women writers as being part of the tradition, and his research on these writers is a valuable resource for those interested in the Irish-American literary tradition.

Lola Ridge, Eleanor Cecilia Donnelly, Mary Anne Sadlier, Lelia Hardin Bugg, Rosa Mulholland, and Mary E. Blake (Diner 95). Kenneally divides fiction by Catholic women (although most of the fiction was written by Irish or English immigrants because of their knowledge of English) into four categories, and raises the pertinent distinction of class: 1. middle-class Anglo-Catholics who wrote for their own class; 2. converts to Catholicism who directed their fiction to Protestants to counter nativism, and get more converts or to get fellow Catholics to be more tolerant of Protestants; 3. immigrant Irish Catholics, critical of Protestants; and 4. preachy Catholic tract fiction (Kenneally 23-4).

If we focus on those writers who fit into 3 and 4, it becomes evident that these Irish-American women writers, although forgotten and dismissed as were most women writers of the period, set the tone for much of the fiction by Irish-American men and women written in the twentieth century. Mary Anne Sadlier's works were published between 1850 and 1870. As the daughter of the publisher, perhaps she had more access to publication than other writers, but her books were usually best sellers. Her fiction depicts the ideology of the immigrant Irish, emphasizing religion, family, community and ethnic pride. However, her fiction also perpetuated an Irish-Catholic "fatalistic acceptance of suffering; opposition to American intellectuality, democracy, progress, and ambition to succeed; advocacy of the old order of traditional customs, the patriarchal family, and a hierarchical society" (Fanning, *Exiles* 140). Life in America was difficult for immigrants who perhaps had not wanted to leave Ireland, for those stuck in the newly emerging urban slums, and for those slightly above the slums, fighting to gain a position of respect in the middle-class. But the fight to move up the economic ladder usually exacts a loss of identity and community, involving assimilation into a culture that resembled that of their British oppressors entirely too much. Sadlier's *The Blakes and the Flanagans* (1855) warned against the errors of materialism for the second generation:

And Henry T. Blake and his sister, Mrs. Thompson, saw all these

Catholic institutions rising and flourishing around them, but no child of theirs ever entered such sacred walls. The dark spell was upon them--the cold indifference of their youth--their year-long neglect of the means of grace--their contempt for Catholic customs and Catholic devotion had grown into a hard callous crust, impervious to the genial rays of faith, hope, or charity. Religion was dead within them, and the world--the fashionable world, was the god of their worship. They sent their children to the same schools where their own faith had been shipwrecked, and the consequences were the same, only more decided. Henry T. Blake came from Columbia College a very bad Catholic, his sons went into it without religion of any kind, saving a sort of predilection in favor of the Baptist sect--what came out may well be guessed. (qtd in Fanning, Exiles 118)

Columbia, and later its sister college Barnard, seems to have been the bane of many immigrant parents: even in the late 1960s, Mary Gordon's parochial school principal refused to write a reference to Barnard for her in fear of her soul.

Another popular woman writer in the late nineteenth century was Katherine Conway (1853-1927) who was also a journalist and editor at the popular Irish-American Pilot. Like Sadlier, Conway upheld the belief that the American Dream was self-destructive, and she also supported traditional female roles at a time when the women's movement with the conference at Seneca Falls was becoming more vocal. As noted earlier, many Irish-American women, despite the lives they themselves led, were quite vocal in their anti-feminism. Conway was even more so because she had access to Pilot and she was a best-selling novelist. She believed that women should marry, and become the moral guardians of the family, yet she herself didn't marry, was a trustee for the Boston Public Library, editor of Pilot, and, like Irish-American women in the workplace, demanded equal pay for

equal work. And Conway was not unusual in her paradoxical position. Anne O'Hare McCormick (1880-1954) was the first woman to serve on the New York Times editorial board and the first woman to win a Pulitzer Prize but "her columns indicated a deep belief in the unchanging moral order and a concern that rising materialism was undermining spiritual life and values. She was convinced these qualities were the special province of women, who had an obligation to fight for moral standards and a belief in God" (Kenneally 158).

Kate O'Flaherty Chopin (1851-1904), who left the church mostly because of her inability to reconcile her lived experience as a woman with the Church's definition, is an exception. Chopin was raised by women, her mother and grandmother, and rejected the subordinate role for women: she smoked cigarettes, wore unconventional clothes, ran the plantation when her husband died, and published nearly 100 stories, many of them unconventional and considered amoral. She wrote for one Catholic periodical (the major venue for most Catholic writers) and her stories often had Catholic settings, but when her writing conflicted with the tenets of the Church, the Church lost. Yet Chopin was not the norm.⁵ The conservative and ambivalent response to both rising income and increasing female emancipation is prevalent in Irish-American fiction from Mary McCarthy to Flannery O'Connor, and even from Elizabeth Cullinan to Mary Gordon. And although until recently, the most famous Irish-American at the Times, Anna Quindlen, may not agree with McCormick about the moral superiority of women, her editorial positions are often based on a strong moral position.

Katherine Conway's novel, Lalor's Maples, one of the first novels that questions Irish-American family life, contains themes that recur in Irish-American fiction in the twentieth century: Mrs. Mary Lalor's "dominance creates a crippling imbalance in the family power structure, and her acquisitive obsessions with the house and respectability result in a perversion of values that nearly destroy" her husband and her daughter Mildred (Fanning Exiles 242). The distinction between the Irish and the Jewish dominant mother

⁵ See Emily Toth's Kate Chopin (New York: Morrow, 1990).

is the distinction between their cultures: the stereotypical Jewish mother over-mothers her child, helps create a powerful self-esteem in her children, and encourages him or her to move up into the middle-class through education, but without a concurrent rejection of religious values, whereas the Irish dominant mother remains distant from her children emotionally, constantly puts them in their place--destroying self esteem, and insists they move to the middle-class quickly in easily attainable positions, bypassing any unnecessary education, all while twisting religious values to suit her needs. This portrait of the Irish-American mother and her rule over her house, husband and children, recurs often enough "to be considered archetypal," according to Fanning, or stereotypical, and is seen in both popular fiction and more literary works by Margaret Mitchell, Mary Doyle Curran, Farrell, O'Neill, Cullinan and Gordon. Irish-American men and women who have written about their childhoods often stress the influence of mother, "her strength, her power to control life. In fact, fathers frequently appeared as the foil of failure against which the mothers' indomitable will and strength contrasted sharply" (Diner 18).

The family, although a source of power and comfort in Mary Sadlier's fiction, provides no shelter in the fiction after Lalor's Maple. As in the Irish family in Ireland before the famine, the children must obey their parents, particularly their mother, as they all must obey the Church. Any deviance or "any expression of individuality is always seen as a challenge to the community, an attempt to elevate oneself at the expense of others" (O'Connell 63). Farrell's Danny O'Neill in the Studs Lonigan trilogy is mocked for his bookishness, Cullinan's Elizabeth in House of Gold suffers for being the only daughter who did not become a nun, or at least marry a wealthy man. In Curran's 1948 novel, The Parish and the Hill, a title which echoes the dualistic titles of the 19th century writers, the tension between the lace-curtain father and the "shanty Irish" mother is visited on their children: one son becomes a violent alcoholic, while the other becomes the suicidal

romantic, two common self-destructive patterns for Irish-American males.⁶ According to Fanning, who is referring to McGoldrick's study, the recurrence of these family portraits is not merely literary, however: "Recent studies of Irish-American families in therapy corroborate the fictional evidence that the old ways persist. Characteristics noted include female dominance in family life, inability to express emotions, embrace of guilt and acceptance of suffering as one's lot in life, and high incidence of alcoholism" (*Exiles* 374). Other critics, such as Andrew Greeley, dismiss the idea that Irish-American families have been psychologically impaired by assimilation. And his analysis of Irish-American literature reflects this: he dismisses writers who suggest the above. "Thus for Greeley does John R. Powers, incredibly, become a better writer than Tom McHale, and thus does Greeley, a self-described admirer of Irish-American women, barely mention novelist Mary Gordon" (Ibson ix). Greeley, however, is a priest, novelist and sociologist, and his literary pronouncements must be filtered through his fiction. Anita Gandolfo describes his fiction as composed of the same three themes: "All three motifs--the erotic as primary sacrament of the encounter with God, sexual violation and physical pain as salvific for women, and male accomplishment as a target for the envious--pervade this fiction" (58).

While both male and female Irish-American writers write about the family, the most obvious difference is the narrative perspective of the favored son as opposed to the dutiful daughter. As reflected in the history of the Irish family, and the Catholic Church, men and women are assigned different yet complementary roles. As detailed earlier in the chapter, in Ireland under British rule, the family's land was inherited by the favored son, not necessarily the eldest son, while the daughters and remaining sons were expected to contribute to the family by working, and consequently, delaying marriage. In the Church, only men are favored with the ability to hold any position of power, while women who enter the church dutifully fulfill the secular needs of parishioners, such as education

⁶ See Anne Halley's introduction to *The Parish and the Hill* (Feminist Press 1986 edition) for a detailed analysis of the novel, as well as historical information on Irish-American immigrants in the Northeast during the 1930s.

and health. Those disinherited sons who choose not to work for either church or hearth but for themselves or their art, often choose exile, as did James Joyce and his Stephen Dedalus, or Farrell's Studs Lonigan, as the only way to make it as an Irish artist. Those dutiful daughters who choose neither the church nor a traditional role as wife or mother, usually choose equivocation over exile, at least at first. Mary McCarthy and Mary Gordon's heroines make several attempts to leave the confines of their Irish-Catholic families, only to repeat the patterns in their new situations. Those men and women who cannot escape physically, often escape through alcohol if they are men, as do O'Neill's Tyrones, or martyrdom if they are women, as do the Cullinan's Devlin women.

Eugene O'Neill's Long Day's Journey Into Night portrays a distinctly Irish-American family, the Tyrones. Each character represents a different type of Irish-American: the father, James, is an immigrant who has had to reinvent himself, at great psychic cost, in the new world; the mother, Mary, is a typical "lace curtain" Irish woman "who yearns for the safety and respectability of an ordinary, middle-class existence" (Shannon 278), but undermines her desires by falling in love with the romantic, charming Tyrone; Jamie, the elder son, is the "ne'er-do-well," who lives off his good looks and charms, and drinks away his troubles and responsibilities; and Edmund, the youngest son, is the tragic-minded, poetic Irishman. Even the maid and the cook, Cathleen and Bridget, are recent greenhorns. The Tyrones live in a New England, all-American town, and as in Fitzgerald's work, the tensions between the Irish and the American temperaments are played out.

The play's tension is embodied in part by the elder Tyrone's outward respect but inner disdain for the millionaire Harker, and the neighboring Chatfields, both of whom are part of the wealthy, New England, Protestant class. The Tyrones isolate themselves from their Protestant neighbors, and cut themselves off from others. Mary had no friends when she first married because she traveled a lot with Tyrone, and, because of her middle-class pretensions, did not wish to associate with the actors' wives, and now because she is too

ashamed to invite guests: the house is shabby and she is a drug addict. The men all leave the house when they want companionship, going to bars or whorehouses for temporary friendships. The gaps between the two cultures--Protestant and Irish, one firmly middle-class, the other struggling middle-class-- are further extended when Edmund's tuberculosis reminds the Tyrones that they are still relative outsiders in the United States. TB was considered an Irish disease for many years because many Irish immigrants came to the United States with it. Jamie, the older son, argues with his father:

JAMIE: I know it's an Irish peasant idea consumption is fatal.

It probably is when you live in a hovel on a bog, but over here,
with modern treatment ...

TYRONE: Don't I know that! What are you gabbing about, anyway?

And keep your dirty tongue off Ireland, with your sneers about
peasants and bogs and hovels!

All the Tyrones are doomed by their Irish-Catholic heritage as it is displaced in American culture, as well as their own response, or lack of response, to their fates. Edmund inherits his maternal grandfather's TB, his paternal grandfather's suicidal tendency, and his mother's nervousness and fatalism, Jamie inherits his father's alcoholism and self-destructive charm and anger. No one seems to have any control over their lives. James Tyrone's miserliness and theatrical career lead to Mary's drug addiction and Edmund's resentment; Jamie hates his brother because of sibling jealousy and the belief that Edmund himself caused Mary's addiction. One critic notes that "[e]ven the comic touches are structured along causal lines: Tyrone is too cheap to burn the lights in the parlor, so Edmund bangs his knee on a hatstand, and Jamie stumbled on the steps" (Brustein 26). Fate is coupled with their own hubris and willfulness to ruin their lives: Mary claims that she gave up a career as a concert pianist, or a nun, for love; Tyrone chooses money over a

serious acting career; Jamie drinks because of his jealousy of Edmund, and Edmund is consciously self-pitying. Mary describes fate: "None of us can help the things life had done to us. They're done before you realize it, and once they're done they make you do other things until at last everything comes between you and what you'd like to be, and you've lost your true self forever" (2.1).

The Tyrones are paralyzed, an Irish-Catholic paralysis seen in Irish and Irish-American fiction of Joyce through Gordon, by an inability to face the past which they fear is all-powerful; yet, contradictorily, they seek refuge, as Mary does, in that past, the world of childhood innocence. The present is too fleeting and the future is death: "Mary: 'The past is the present, isn't it? It's the future, too. We all try to lie out of that but life won't let us.'" This family suffers from the tensions of the modern world, a world where God is dead and so is the comfort that that world offered to Mary and James. Edmund reads with anguish, hoping they are false, Nietzsche's words that God is dead, while his mother wishes "If I could only find the faith I lost, so I could pray again!" Edmund inherits his mother's longing for faith, while also recognizing that like the morphine she abuses, religious faith is also merely a trap. The tragic tension in the play is the recognition that modern man, despite a desire to believe in free will, has no free will. Fate is seen throughout the play, in the repetitions, in the power of the past over the present, and in the symbol of the fog: "The fog was O'Neill's first and last symbol of man's inability to know himself, or other men, or his destiny...Through the fog at intervals a foghorn moans, followed by a warning chorus of ship's bells--the leitmotif of the family fate, sounding whenever that fate asserts itself" (Falk 10). The fog represents the past impinging on the present, paralyzing the Tyrones in the fog, and allows them to deny aspects of their lives that are too painful. As the fog gets worse, Mary takes more drugs, denying that she is doing so, denying that Edmund has TB. Edmund deliberately walks in the fog, despite his TB, in order to experience denial: "I didn't meet a soul. Everything looked and sounded unreal. Nothing was what it is. That's what I wanted--to be alone with myself in another world where truth

is untrue and life can hide from itself." Unlike the Jews, for example, the Irish Tyrone do not gather strength from a painful past in order to fight its recurrence in the future: the Tyrone have inherited the Irish tendency to fatalism, an idealization of the past that paralyzes them from moving forward.

The allusions to Irish character in the play are deliberate: all the Tyrone, including the servants, are physically described as Irish, with "Irish charm" or "Irish face" or "Irish peasant." In emphasizing the Tyrone's Irishness, O'Neill is distinguishing Irish fatalism from the American philosophy of self-reliance. Harold Bloom sees O'Neill's play as un-American in many ways, dark and pessimistic rather than optimistic, decrying a country that "had refused to learn the truths of the spirit, which are that good and the means of good, love and the means of love, are irreconcilable" (3). The only hope for any of them is seen in Edmund who recognizes that instead of passively accepting his destiny he can embrace it, and attempt to accept without reconciling, the contradictions inherent in his dualistic world view. He alone can both hate his father and love him at the same time. Tragically, however, he is dying.

Several themes that recur in many works of fiction by Irish-Americans are apparent in F. Scott Fitzgerald's fiction, despite his desire to repudiate his upper-middle-class Irish-Catholic background. Fitzgerald wanted to be a part of, and was in many ways accepted by, a group of wealthy, mostly Anglo-Saxon Protestants, like Mary McCarthy, who also wrote about the groups she joined, this gave him both the knowledge of the group as well as the objectivity that comes from being an outsider; according to Malcolm Cowley, "it gave him a sense of standing apart that sharpened his observation of social differences" (28). Like many second and third generation Irish, Fitzgerald, with support from his mother, was very anxious about social class, but also cynical about it once he got to the apex; he was attracted to the tragic and the romantic, but was, again, cynical about romance. The main themes in his fiction, repeated again and again in Irish-American fiction, are the moral failure of America's material success and a tragic sense of life and man's inability to

overcome evil. As Shannon writes, Fitzgerald was “a romantic about the possibilities of experience and a moralist about the consequence of it” (241).

In the short story “Benediction,” the young, flapper Lois goes to visit her brother Keith, a priest, at a monastery. Lois represents, as do many of Fitzgerald’s female characters, materialism, worldliness and sensuality; her brother represents asceticism, faith and devotion to an idea. Not surprisingly, the story ends with Lois’ failure to appreciate the values of living a spiritual life and her tragic inability to recognize the meaning of the epiphany in the chapel. Catholic publications at the time, according to Joan Allen, recognized more than literary critics, that this story was favorable to the Church, despite Fitzgerald’s complaint that the Church hated his fiction (44). Not only does this story in particular favor Keith’s values over Lois’, it also reflects Church dichotomy of the sexes, where men live the life of the mind and spirit, and women are in possession of the evilness of the body.

In fact in all Fitzgerald’s fiction, women lure priest-like men with their bodies, an even more conservative attitude considering the liberalism of the 1920s. Daisy Fay and Jordan Baker the tennis player to Nicole Diver and Rosemary Hoyt the actress, all are femme fatales for Gatsby and Nick Carraway and Dick Diver. Yet Fitzgerald never details the sex scenes, or even uses coarse expressions to describe their sexuality. When Dick Diver finally has sex with Rosemary Hoyt the scene ends before the foreplay begins. And Diver punishes himself immediately after his affair by getting into a fist fight where he ends up in jail. Sex, in Fitzgerald, corrupts. In “Bernice Bobs Her Hair” the unpopular Bernice gains popularity by acting and talking in innuendoes, and allowing certain boys to kiss her, but when she bobs her hair--a sin in the traditional Catholic church and a sure sign of sexual freedom in the 1920s--she is seen by all the characters in the story as going too far. Finally, Gatsby’s failure is in part a result of his inability to recognize Daisy as a femme fatale; he “attempts to transubstantiate Daisy and defy the limitations of linear history by mingling her worldly existence with a timeless essence. Gatsby assumes that it is

possible to 'repeat the past,' and seeks to redeem the accident of Daisy's time on earth by infusing her with a 'spiritual' substance that epitomizes a higher, 'divine' grace"(Giles 186). Gatsby's hubris, in the eyes of a fatalistic author, contributes to his downfall, supported by his entrapment by Daisy.

Jay Gatsby's background, although seemingly unethnic and American in The Great Gatsby, is examined in more detail in Fitzgerald's story "Absolution" which most critics believe is the precursor to Gatsby as a character. The story details the early religious training and the spiritual crisis of a young boy. The boy wants to be a priest, but his dream is shattered by the priest's failure and alcoholism. As a result of his Catholic indoctrination, Gatsby, as the grown up boy, switches the focus of his faith from the church and spiritualism to the American dream and materialism. The green light at the end of Daisy's pier, his colorful array of new shirts, his mansion, his parties and Daisy herself replace the symbolism of his youth: Daisy is his new Madonna, the green light is his candle, the parties are his Mass, and the mansion his church. Joan Allen notes:

He becomes a celebrant-priest dedicated to the ritualized acquisition of wealth and the futile pursuit of an idealized City of Man...When Nick first sees Gatsby he is standing on the lawn of his temple, and he is puzzled by Gatsby's stretching out his arms toward the dark water 'in a curious way'...priestly gestures both of longing and benediction.
(102)

Dick Diver, too, although he is not a Catholic, but the son of a minister, is also seen in a priestly role, blessing the beach with his right hand at the end of Tender is the Night, although here, unlike with Gatsby, it is done ironically, with a recognition that his social and material successes ruined his life. (That it is Nicole Diver, and not Dick, who is Catholic could suggest that Fitzgerald saw the Church's successful assimilation as a

surrender to materialistic values.) The theme of the failure of material success is personified in Gatsby with Dr. Eckleburg's eyes staring across the desolation and sterility of Queens, gateway to the City of Man. All the Irish characters either distrust or are destroyed by wealth: Diver with his Irish name, carrot top and "moving...in an Irish way"; Charles Wales, from "Babylon Revisited" also has an "Irish mobility" in his face; Rosemary Hoyt is embarrassed by her success as an actress, and, as Dick analyzes her: "She doesn't think; her real depths are Irish and romantic and illogical" (177). In Fitzgerald's fiction, the beautiful, both men and women, are ultimately damned, particularly if they are influenced by the American dream of wealth. In The Last Tycoon, Fitzgerald's last, and unfinished, novel, the Irish-born heroine Kathleen is a portrait of innocence who can not truly be a part of the false world of Hollywood while the Irish-American Pat Brady adopts the ruthlessness seen as necessary to succeed in America. Fitzgerald's Irish-Catholicism is most apparent in Tycoon because it depicts that the destructiveness of placing value in material wealth is directly connected to the failure of Irish-Americans, in their need for social and material success, to recognize this.

Tycoon separates Fitzgerald from the literary modernists; although he shared their despair at the apparent death of God, his pessimism, his distrust of human achievement, his dualism, his sexual puritanism are distinctly related to his Irish Catholicism. (This is also apparent in Ernest Hemingway's fiction.) Unlike the modernists, Fitzgerald did not use any technical innovations in his writing but relied on the graceful prose of the previous generation of writers. Hemingway called Fitzgerald's pessimism a "cheap Irish love of defeat" (qtd. in Giles 21) and Fitzgerald himself wrote to his daughter that "life is essentially a cheat and its conditions are those of defeat."

I must hold in balance the sense of futility of effort, and the sense of
the necessity of struggle; the conviction of the inevitability of failure

and still the determination to “succeed”--and, more than these, the contradiction between the dead hand of the past and the high intentions of the future. (Crack-Up 60).

It is a typical Irish-Catholic perception that one must be able to function in life despite human failures, that one must assimilate into American society, while still distrusting material success, that one must believe that the bread and the wine are the body and blood of Christ, and not merely symbols. Literary modernism intersected with Catholicism in such a way that allowed Irish-American writers to move beyond pure didacticism to something richer, although of course Fitzgerald and Hemingway are now recognized, if they weren't in the twenties, as deeply moral writers.

James T. Farrell's Studs Lonigan (1938) has been dismissed by many literary critics as a sociological account of growing up Irish-American in the slums of Chicago, though praised by others for being a tragic portrait of cultural poverty.⁷ It is actually a bit of both, and for the purposes of this study, the interesting point to be made is the later. With Studs, Farrell continues the theme that began in the Irish-American didactic fiction of Mary Sadlier: the influence of the dominant American culture's economic and moral philosophies on the Irish is negative. Studs is not a boy from the slums; his family is relatively middle-class. His problem is not economic poverty but spiritual poverty. His family, Church, school all failed to provide him with standards and incentives, thus allowing the streets, a compilation of corrupt American values, to take over his moral education. In the first volume of the trilogy, Studs adopts the values of becoming popular with economic, physical, and sexual conquests, and dreams of becoming a big shot in his small town. The second volume details his frustration and defeat, and his retreat into the past with the aid of alcohol. The Catholic Church is blamed for supporting the street values of making money and moving up economically at the expense of education and spiritual development.

⁷ Recent essays on Irish-American women writers by Patricia Monaghan and Catherine Ward are reevaluating previous studies by Charles Fanning, Daniel Casey and Richard Rhodes.

Thematically, Farrell's fiction adds to the continuity of the Irish-American Literary Tradition. His didactic morality, anti-capitalism, sentimentalism, not to mention his long-suffering, yet matriarchal mother figures such as Nora Ryan, firmly places him in the same category as the 19th century Irish-American writers. Yet the focus on Farrell perhaps may limit the scope of Irish-American literature, excluding women writers who attempt to portray the flaws of the lace-curtain mother, or who have a more ambiguous attachment to the Church, or who allow their heroines to achieve, if only slightly, a sense of self in the capitalist world. The focus on the works of Mary McCarthy and Mary Gordon in this study is an attempt to retrieve them from what is often a Farrell-centered literary tradition.

Margaret Connors claims that Mary Sadlier's moralistic literature perpetuated stereotypes of Irish as "humble, obedient laborers and domestics, whose outstanding virtue was their loyalty to the church" and that twentieth-century Irish-American writers, particularly women writers, have perpetuated these stereotypes, with "few multi-faceted portrayals of Irish women" (4, 8). She focuses on the fiction of James T. Farrell and Elizabeth Cullinan, with their dominant mothers, and subservient or guilt-ridden rebellious daughters. She could also add Katherine Conway's Lalor's Maples, Mary McCarthy's Memories of a Catholic Girlhood, Alice McDermott's At Weddings and Wakes, and Mary Gordon's The Other Side, and they recur in contemporary Irish fiction by women, such as the stories of Edna O'Brien. Yet as with all stereotypes, each writer deals with them depending on her talent. The matriarchs, Momma in McDermott's work, Mrs. Devlin in Cullinan's, Ellen in Gordon's, are both similar and very different, and their daughter's responses to them cannot be simplified, as Connors believes. Yes, all the mothers are controlling, didactic, pessimistic, emotionally cold, and have a preference for their sons over their daughters. In McDermott's At Weddings and Wakes, Momma, who is actually the real matriarch's sister, though her power is stronger because she took over as mother, rules over her three nieces/daughters with quiet strength, as they all meet each week to complain about their lives, and each other, over cocktails. The story is told from her

youngest grandchild's perspective, a narrator looking back at her own past with these women, a narrator who alone of her siblings seems to have inherited the fatalism, guilt, simmering anger and pain of her female relatives. Momma won't let her grandchildren open up their Christmas gifts in her house because of the mess that would result, enforcing an old Irish habit of prolonging pleasure. Out of boredom, the children play in the small, dark, Brooklyn apartment, and when one gets hurt, Momma says, "That's a lesson for you. That was the hand of God" (127).

Elizabeth Cullinan, unlike McCarthy and Gordon, is frequently listed in the canon of Irish-American literature. Greeley believes she is one of the few writers who is sympathetic to her heritage (The Irish-Americans 228), whereas Fanning argues that Cullinan alone has been able to destroy "the pervasive cultural idealization of the saintly matriarch" in House of Gold (1970) (The Irish Voice 329). Others, like Connors, disagree and accuse Cullinan of perpetuating the stereotype of the domineering and dangerous immigrant Irish-American mother. The difference in their opinions may be the difference in their reading selections: the Irish-American mother is much more destructive in the fiction of women writers than in male writers. But Eileen Kennedy points out that

Though all these characters are typical, they are not stereotypes. Highly individualized, they present a concentrated history of working-class Irish Catholics moving, via the church, politics, and the military, into the middle-class. Entering professions Mother approves of... the children futilely try to escape her...(96)

Perhaps all novels that detail the assimilation process require typical characters. In an Irish family, members are "typed" at a young age, and the existence of the favored son, the obedient daughter, and the absent or weak father seems to be a common denominator in many accounts of first and second generation Irish families in America. When a third or

fourth generation Irish-American writer wants to explore his or her cultural heritage, they may consciously choose, as Werner Sollors noted, to emphasize certain cultural types that they see, perhaps to a lesser degree in their own families. In many ways, the cultural history of the Irish confirms the experiences of many Irish-American children, and thus these character types (which become more individual depending on the writer) are used as validation of individual experience more than censure or blame.

Elizabeth Cullinan's House of Gold (1970) takes place over two days and a night, during which Mrs. Devlin is dying while her extended family gathers in her house to wait. Each of her children, as we see in the quote above, has entered into the stereotypical middle-class, Irish-American professions at their mother's urging (their father, a fireman, has been dead for years, and was more absent than not when alive). There are two priests (one had died doing missionary work, and is not treated as the family saint) and two nuns, one military man, and one married daughter who, seditiously, moved out of her mother's home only recently with her husband and two daughters, to a house nearby in the suburbs. Mrs. Devlin's journey to America was not pretty, and she had to work as a domestic before she met and married Mr. Devlin. As O'Neill does in Long Day's Journey and Gordon in The Other Side, Cullinan's novel describes how family patterns mold each member of the family. As in the above works, Cullinan relies on a mixture of irony (the ironic distance from the self-destructive characters), satire (of the excessive materialism of Catholicism in the Devlin house), and compassion (for her characters, nonetheless), and she achieves objectivity by having the some of the story filtered through the Claire, a daughter-in-law, married to the military man.

Mrs. Devlin's authority over her family is seen as coming from the authoritarianism of the church, much like Isabel's father, Professor Moore, in Gordon's Final Payments, gains his moral superiority from the church. Mrs. Devlin's house is her church, and much can be said about the recurrence of the "important houses" in Irish-American fiction, particularly that fiction that details the immigrants rise to the middle-class, from Katherine

Conway to Mary Gordon.⁸ Charles Fanning's essay, "The Woman of the House: Aspects of Irish-American Fiction," details the importance of houses. The "Big House" of Irish Protestants and aristocracy in Ireland was "a place of gardens and grandeur that represented unattainable wealth and social position" (82). The Irish peasants were often evicted from the shacks they occupied, especially during the famine (a clear memory for most first generation immigrants). The historical significance of the house, coupled with the middle-class American juxtaposition of home ownership and privacy with success, both worked to make the home a powerful place of refuge and of economic superiority. Even poor Irish-Americans transferred their love of houses to the church, and the Irish immigrants sacrificed the little money they had to pay for and build parish churches. Lalor's Maple is the story of a wife and mother who gets her husband to build her a house as big as the Protestants (with tragic results); Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby builds a mansion in order to attract the attention of his Protestant love; O'Neill's Mary Tyrone bemoans the fact that her husband has never provided her with a house of her own, except for the temporary summer rentals; in Brenden Gill's The Trouble of One House (1950), the matriarch is defined by her house; and the story of the MacNamara's in Gordon's The Other Side opens with Vincent's intentional destruction of the front windows of his beloved home in order to get the neighbors' attention.

In House of Gold, Mrs. Devlin's altar is the television set, upon which rests the pictures of her once golden-haired children. All the children have followed the roles Mrs. Devlin set out for them, some replacing the authority of her house with that of the church or the army, while the rest continue to defer to her. Her youngest son, Justin, still lives at home and works as a bartender on 42nd Street, the only child who has a chance to at least recognize how crippling life in this emotionally repressed, authoritative house has been; he is also the only one not trapped by a blinding reliance on church dogma, Irish-American

⁸ See also Fred L. Gardaphe's study on the evolving meaning of houses for the Italian-American family in his essay "My House is Not Your House: Jerre Mangione and Italian-American Autobiography." In Multicultural America: American Lives. Ed. James Robert Payne. Knoxville: U of Tennessee Press, 1992: 139-177.

tradition, and, as the baby of the family, his mother's authority. Of course, he may simply blind his self-awareness with drink. Claire notices that even the grandchildren, the obedient daughter's two girls, Julie and Winnie, (her own two boys have at least her mothering to counteract the strictness of their father), are unnaturally good and polite, though Winnie, who considers herself and her immediate family the unloved ones ("she was one of Elizabeth's girls, one of the Carrolls, an accessory to the Devlins, not to be taken into account or not, anyway taken seriously" (62)) is also recognizing, with the help of a job that allows her some independence, and simply the youth culture of the 1960s confirmed by Vatican II, the destructiveness of being part of the Devlins. While Claire examines the photos of Mrs. Devlin's children she notices that

All the children, alone or paired-off, stood perfectly straight, hands at their sides, as they might have stood in a classroom when called on to give an answer...every single one of them looked so concerned about something, their young faces were so anxious-to-please, afraid-to-displease. You wanted to gather them all in, tell them not to worry ...that nothing depended on them yet. But wouldn't the worry have become all the greater?...for they'd been given so much--everything. And they knew how much was required of them in return--everything.
(180)

Mrs. Devlin's obsessive desire for a home turns out to be a middle-class fortress against her past, "an illusion of home" (Fanning, "Woman," 111). Yet inside the illusion, as Claire recognizes, they have "both safety and happiness" which could not be coupled outside the myth since, as Mary Gordon's heroines each discover, happiness necessitates risk.

Women writers reflect female experiences, ones that male critics may not recognize as valid experiences. Charles Fanning lumps most women writers under the title “domestic fiction,” that is, fiction that is on the “light side” with stereotypical targets such as the church or parochial school (Irish 329). As Patricia Monaghan astutely points out, if one has chosen as the paradigm of Irish-American literature those writers who write about politics (like Edwin O’Connor and John O’Hara--Mary McCarthy’s politics are too personalized), pub life (Farrell and O’Neill), and priests (Powers, Farrell, O’Hara--Mary Gordon writes about priests, but they are not as politically astute and powerful as the priests in the above writers’ works), then Irish-American women’s focus on female experiences are often left out.

Chapter Three

Mary McCarthy and Mary Gordon

Introduction

Both Mary McCarthy (1912-1989) and Mary Gordon (1949) were raised in the orthodox, pre-Vatican II Catholic church; as adult writers they are often compared because of their Irish-Catholic allusions and backgrounds, and because of their focus on moral issues. The two writers also admire each other: One of McCarthy's most positive critics, Mary Gordon wrote perhaps the only enthusiastic review of Cannibals and Missionaries, and McCarthy is said to have admired the review. After quoting a few lines from The Company She Keeps, Gordon writes: "This represents the essence of McCarthy's sensibility: the fineness, the formality, the stance that cannot imagine any but a moral perspective. No one born after 1930 could have written any of those sentences. The case and balance, largely moral, suggest a lost world" (Good Boys 62). A nostalgia for the clearly delineated world of their Catholic childhoods is shared by both writers.

Oddly enough, both writers also share an exposure at a young age to other cultural and religious sensibilities, allowing them another perspective on what could have been a closed, sheltered life. McCarthy grew up with two Catholicisms, one lace-curtain Irish (a pejorative Irish/Irish-American term to describe those who aspire to be like the Protestant upper middle-class and who disdain their working-class cultural roots), the other Jesuit French, in addition to a Protestant grandfather and Jewish grandmother. Gordon's father was a Jewish convert to Catholicism--a strict, orthodox Catholicism--while her mother was a second generation Irish-Italian Catholic. It is partly their mixed heritages that allow both writers to reexamine their predominantly Irish-Catholic heritage with some objectivity. According to Mary Gordon, she chose to attend Barnard College over Catholic Fordham

because “I read J.D. Salinger’s fiction, particularly about the Glass family, and that was the world I wanted. I wanted a world of Jewish intellectuals” (qtd. in Samway 13).

But there are differences between the two writers that allow Gordon specifically to reconcile her conservative cultural and religious sensibilities with her contemporary liberal, political and social awareness. McCarthy spent her childhood (both in Seattle and in Minneapolis) in relatively poor economic circumstances, yet with the very conspicuously wealthy McCarthy grandparents able to shelter her from the fear of poverty or the pain of social ostracism. Later, when she moved back to Seattle with her Preston grandparents, she benefited fully from their wealth and social class. Gordon, however, grew up in a middle-class neighborhood in Queens, New York, where, by her own account, she never met a non-Irish-Catholic, except for an occasional shopkeeper, until she left for college. Despite the generation gap, Gordon is physically, emotionally and psychologically closer to her immigrant past than McCarthy because of her family’s economic and social class. As a result, the subject of most of Gordon’s fiction, not just the underlying sensibility, is working- and middle-class Irish-Catholic-American life.

Although both writers respond cautiously in their works to political and social changes, only Gordon experienced the upheaval of Vatican II in the mid-1960s. When Mary McCarthy pretends to lose her faith, then actually does, the loss is softened by the continuing existence of the Church as she knew it. But Gordon’s loss of faith at the same age coincided with Vatican II, making the adolescent rebellion from the confines of an orthodox religion more permanent, and perhaps more devastating. The generational difference, however, does allow Gordon an awareness and appreciation of the original goals of feminism, which recognized the need for women to take responsibility for their lives and their happiness. Both writers have had problems with some of the more restrictive, ideological elements of feminism; however, Gordon’s feminism has allowed her to create heroines who are very different than McCarthy’s, who are better able to

negotiate between their Irish-Catholic heritage and the predominant Protestant-American society.

This chapter is an introduction to the two writers, and an illustration of how their works reflect their particular Irish-Catholic-American sensibilities.

Mary McCarthy

Mary McCarthy's paternal family was second and third generation Irish-Catholic, and had reached the upper levels of the middle-class. Unlike many of the writers discussed in the previous chapter, she did not write about the rising middle-class, immigrant-ghetto Catholicism, and few of her characters are stereotypically Irish-Catholic. She also never ventured to write a story about an Irish-Catholic family, and this could be because she herself was orphaned at age six, and raised by three distinctly different families: with her Catholic father, and her upper-class, Protestant mother, who converted; with her Catholic Aunt McCarthy and her indeterminately-religious husband, Myers, via her Catholic paternal grandparents; and with her Protestant and Jewish maternal grandparents, via a Catholic boarding school. Although Catholicism is a given in each family, she did not live in what we would consider the traditional Irish-American family.

However, McCarthy was not entirely unaware of her Irish-Catholic heritage, and as an infamously autobiographical writer, evidence of her religious and cultural heritage appears in all her work. At age eight she wrote a state-prize winning essay titled "The Irish in American History" (earning a beating by her Uncle Myers, a twisted result, ironically, of the Irish belief that too much pride is dangerous, so that she would "not get a big head"). At about the same time, young Mary was in a school play where she, in her usual controlling way, memorized and silently mimed every line in the play during the performance. Writing about her Aunt Margaret, McCarthy notes: "I don't recall the words she used to bring me to my senses, only the derision in her voice--typically Irish,

by the way. It's possible that she mimicked the movement of my young lips with her old ones" (How I Grew 21).

With several biographies (most notably Carol Brightman's and Carol Gelderman's) filling in the gaps, McCarthy has written two detailed autobiographies about growing up Irish-Catholic in the early 20th century, Memories of a Catholic Girlhood (1957) and How I Grew (1987). (Intellectual Memoirs (1992) is a brief portrait of her life between 1936-1938 in New York.) Born in 1912 in Seattle to Tess Preston and Roy McCarthy, Mary lived the life of a fairy princess with two young, beautiful parents who adored her and her three brothers. Tess converted from Protestantism and became, like many converts, much more Catholic than any McCarthy, pressing upon her children how lucky they were to be Catholic.¹ Her father's heart illness often kept him home with his children, and Mary's brief six years with him affected her greatly. Her parents died in the 1918 flu epidemic when Mary was six. She and her brothers stayed first with their paternal grandparents, strict lace-curtain Catholics in then provincial Minneapolis. Her grandmother McCarthy's vulgar, materialistic, unchristian Catholicism contrasted greatly both with the spiritual, communal Catholicism her mother had instilled in her, and the intellectual, romantic Catholicism she later met at the Sacred Heart Academy as a young teenager. Soon after, the orphans were shuttled off to an old aunt and her fiendish husband, Myers.

Her life with Aunt Margaret and Uncle Myers was hellish: they treated the children as if they were recruits in boot camp, with skimpy, meatless meals, no pillows at night. They were thrown out in the harsh Minneapolis weather to "play," and worst of all for an intelligent girl unexpectedly plucked from a fairy tale existence in Seattle, there were few books and no sense of aesthetics permitted. McCarthy describes herself during this time (ages six to twelve) as ugly, suitably reflecting the life she had there. Aunt Margaret and Uncle Myers married when Margaret was already deemed a spinster; both were

¹ McCarthy noted that the Church got three Protestants in her mother's generation: "All the Protestant daughters-in-law became converts...In my generation at least three...were lost to the faith" (Memories 125).

considered the outsiders of the McCarthy family. Carol Brightman points out that “[i]n the pecking order that reigns in many extended families, especially Irish-American families ...[they] were the poor relations, a childless, middle-aged couple...” (“Writing Dangerously” 137). In Memories of a Catholic Girlhood and How I Grew, McCarthy’s portrait of the McCarthy family is quite savage. They are the “typical” lace-curtain, status-conscious, middle-class second generation Irish-Americans, far from the ghettos of New York, in Catholic Minneapolis. Grandma McCarthy ruled her brood with an iron fist, while her money-making husband stayed on the side lines: even her daughters-in-law converted to Catholicism, most likely to please her. Hers was a dour Catholicism, embellished with her anger over everything from birth control, divorce and mixed marriages to the evil Protestants. She went to church but, according to her granddaughter, “she was quite without Christian feeling; the mercy of the Lord Jesus had never entered her heart. Her piety was an act of war against the Protestant ascendancy” (Memories 33). McCarthy recalls that like other Irish-Catholic nouveau riche, the McCarthy’s were “filled with aristocratic delusions” (57). Yet during this time she was exposed to another side of Catholicism at the St. Joseph parochial school she attended where she was able to obtain some sense of beauty, books, achievement.

Catholic parochial schools were established in the 19th century by the Church to help immigrants, particularly Irish and German Catholics at first, adapt to the values of American culture while still retaining their distinct Catholicism. The result was a new hybrid of Catholicism and capitalism, and parochial schools that focused more on strict obedience, competitiveness and religious dogma rather than developing budding intellects. Every learning experience, according to McCarthy, involved a contest with ribbons for the winner, debates, spelling bees, conduct ribbons, sports, etc., in an attempt to show the Protestants that Catholics can beat them at their own game. Her education reinforced the idea that there are standards to be met, that not everything is relative, an idea that seems anti-democratic, but is in fact at the basis of capitalistic, and Catholic, thought:

There was no idea of equality in the parochial school, and such an idea would have been abhorrent to me, if it had existed; equality, a sort of brutal cutting down to size, was what I was treated to at home. Equality was a species of unfairness which the good sisters of St. Joseph would not have tolerated. (Memories 19)

At St. Stephen's that Mary could show off, win ribbons and awards. The parish priests and nuns at St. Joseph, like her parents in Seattle, attempted to teach that Catholicism was a religion of beauty and specialness, "however imperfectly realized" (Memories 21). But with Uncle Myers trying to beat their lessons out of her, and her Grandmother McCarthy's "sour, baleful doctrine" at the Big House down the street, it is surprising, but a coup for St. Stephen's, that young McCarthy was able to have any feelings for the Church that could not save her from her guardians.

After six years of this, Grandfather Preston finally realized his moral obligation and went to Minneapolis to save his grandchildren. For some reason, he only took Mary back to Seattle, leaving the boys in boarding school. At first Mary was nervous about the "Protestants getting her" as she was so often warned against them by Grandmother McCarthy and the nuns at St. Stephen's. But Grandfather Preston put her in a Catholic school, The Ladies of the Sacred Heart, a girl's version of the Jesuit school attended by James Joyce, and as powerful an influence on a budding intellectual writer.

McCarthy described Catholicism in Minneapolis "as a branch of civics and conformity" in contrast to Sacred Heart's "mysterious aristocratic punctilio" (Memories 104). It was there that McCarthy returned to the elitism of her mother and romanticism of her father through the nuns and their love of the past. The nuns of Sacred Heart were as respectful of authority and tradition as the Jesuits, and unlike "ordinary" nuns these women were worldly intellectuals influenced by the French, not the naive, uneducated

nuns at St. Stephen's, and they, like their students, came from the best families. McCarthy learned more about French history, European Catholic history with its martyrs and saints, than American history and ideas. She learned Latin and other useless pursuits, useless if one wants to succeed in capitalistic America, instilling in her a distaste for American pragmatism that we see in much of her fiction. The nuns at Sacred Heart were always for the underdogs in history, the romantic agnostics like Byron, rather than the pragmatic Rousseau. Her few years with the nuns and their passion for the romantic figure made her yearn for nonconformity as a teenager, which eventually backfired, causing her to lose her faith. Years later in her first novel, The Company She Keeps (1942), the heroine Meg Sargent remembers that she was always attracted to unpopular causes: "When you were young it had been the South, the Dauphin, Bonnie Prince Charlie; later it was Debs and now Trotsky that you love." The nuns taught her that education is passionate, not always pragmatic. And McCarthy noted in Memories that the "final usefulness of my Catholic training was to teach me, together with much that proved to be practical, a conception of something prior and beyond utility..." (26).

To care for the quarrels of the past, to identify oneself passionately with a cause that became, politically speaking, a losing cause with the birth of the modern world, is to experience a kind of straining against reality, a rebellious nonconformity that, again, is rare in America, where children are instructed in the virtues of the system they live under, as though history had achieved a happy ending in American civics. (Memories 25)

Unlike St. Stephen's, Sacred Heart realized the beauty and goodness of Catholicism for the aesthetically hungry McCarthy.

McCarthy wrote in Memories that it is difficult to respond to the oft-asked question of whether she retains anything from her Catholic heritage: "This is hard to answer, partly because my Catholic heritage consists of two distinct strains" (21) referring to the Catholicism of her parents, St. Stephen's and Sacred Heart versus the "sour, baleful doctrine" of Grandmother McCarthy. This apparent discrepancy in Catholicism, as well as the influence of her Protestant grandfather, greatly affected McCarthy's often ambiguous relationship with Catholicism. In The Company She Keeps, the heroine, Meg Sargent, contrasts her Aunt Clara's section of the house with her secular father's: "red votive lamps, altars and holy pictures (the Sacred Heart, Veronica's veil with the eyes that followed you about the room...), a rich, emotional decor that made the downstairs with its china shepherdesses, Tiffany glass, bronze smoking sets, and family photographs look matter-of-fact and faded..." (265-6). Aunt Clara is modeled after both the hated Aunt Margaret and Grandma McCarthy. Meg's bedroom, like McCarthy's feelings for the Church, is somewhere in between.

Despite the beauty and the power she found in her Catholic heritage, and perhaps because of the mixed signals she received at Sacred Heart, McCarthy also found too much hypocrisy in the Church. The nuns that praised the agnostic Byron also warned their students against "the sin of doubt, that curse of fine intellects" (Memories 104). McCarthy vividly portrayed how out of touch with reality the nuns were with her comically detailed menstruation narrative: when a superficial cut on young McCarthy's leg stains the sheets, she is too embarrassed to counter the nuns' immediate conclusion. Contradictions and events such as these cause McCarthy to applaud the sense of privilege the church instilled in her on the one hand, and on the other write: "The Catholic religion, I believe, is the most dangerous of all, morally...because with its claim to be the only true religion, it fosters that sense of privilege...the notion that not everyone is lucky enough to be Catholic" (23). Anger at Grandmother McCarthy's illiterate intolerance of Protestants filter into McCarthy's negative perception of Catholicism almost unawares.

As an adult writing her autobiography, McCarthy writes of her paternal grandparents with great disdain, but as a child, she only desired to be with them rather than the strap-happy Myers, and at least some of her own values, including "aristocratic delusions," were formed by the thoroughly bourgeois McCarthys. All of McCarthy's heroines attempt to flee their lace-curtain, middle-class backgrounds, while at the same time they frequently choosing paths and men who lead them right back to it: Meg Sargent temporarily falls for Mr. Breen and marries the staid Frederick; Martha Sinnot returns to live and create a baby in the same town as her ex-husband, and she is the only resident, besides her current husband, who doesn't let go of her middle-class values. At other times, like Eugene O'Neill's *Mary Tyrone*, they yearn for the safety and respectability of an ordinary, middle-class existence (though not always consciously), then they go and marry an actor: Kay marries the itinerant actor Harold, although she wants to live on the Upper East Side and furnish her apartment with the latest from Macys.

Despite her filial denial, McCarthy's father probably did fit the portrait of the unreliable, alcoholic Irishman with a gift of gab, saved only by his parents' money. She remembers him fondly, and is aware that she idealizes him to a certain extent; a ne'er-do-well Irish father-figure appears in several of her works. Dolly in *A Charmed Life*, an orphan like McCarthy, is attracted to the most dissipated man in town, and she invests in him qualities that come close to Christ-like. Polly in *The Group* has a father who, though suffering from manic-depression, is as charming and life-affirming as her old boyfriend Gus is not, and it is only with his arrival that she meets prince charming, the doctor who agrees to marry her and care for him--the perfect fairy tale ending. With Dolly and Polly, McCarthy appears to be her own romantic idealism.

In *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, McCarthy expresses concern over her uncle's remark about her father's trait of lying. She fears she has inherited this trait (without his care-free attitude, no doubt); every moral crisis she faces, as an adult or child, requires her to lie--or equivocate--to save face and keep her respectability. With humor yet

lingering pain, McCarthy describes how her first Communion was spoiled by her rebellious subconscious that allowed her to take a sip of water, and to take the Host without fasting would be a mortal sin.

Every subsequent moral crisis of my life, moreover, has had precisely the pattern of this struggle over the first Communion; I have battled, usually without avail, against a temptation to do something which only I knew was bad, being swept on by a need to preserve outward appearances and to live up to other people's expectations of me. (20-21)

Interestingly, although as a young woman McCarthy felt free enough to sleep with any man she wanted to, she was concerned what the concierge at the hotel would think. There is that tension in McCarthy's life and works: McCarthy and her heroines are, in true Irish fashion, torn between respectability and rebelliousness.

McCarthy's nervousness about her lying, and her notorious honesty can also be traced back to her Irish-Catholic heritage. All Catholics are taught to consult their souls to ferret out all lies and sins before confession, but not all Catholics are honest. Yet for McCarthy there is a sensitivity to the lies and omissions of her childhood (neither she nor her brothers were ever told by any adult that their parents had died), and her sensitivity to lies also seems to have influenced her ability to create imaginative fiction; most of her works are roman à clèfs, autobiographical, based on the life she has led and the people she has known. And critics from her Vassar English teacher to her most recent biographer all prefer her nonfiction to her fiction. Interestingly, although her ideas are all hers, she often referred to the Catholic Encyclopedia to help with her Catholic allusions, even though she had a thorough parochial school education.² Like several other Irish-

² This is according to Carol Brightman, during a lecture at the 92nd Street Y in New York City on October 25, 1992.

American writers, she was often better at journalism or sociological fiction, rather than imaginative fiction, perhaps out of a particularly Irish-Catholic distrust of fiction.

McCarthy's Irish-American Fiction

Irish Fatalism

Several critics have accused McCarthy of writing fiction that is dry, without emotion, too objective. McCarthy herself wrote that compared to the others in her family, she was the only one to “ever let his private feelings be seen” (How I Grew 189). Repressing emotions is often the result of a fear of being mocked, as in the Irish-American McCarthy household, or a fear of being out of control, which was perhaps the case in the Protestant-Jewish Preston house. In her review of How I Grew, Alison Lurie is appalled and frightened at McCarthy’s comic description of a suicide attempt at age 15: “I cannot say exactly why I was roaming around his backyard with a bottle of iodine in my hand all dressed up to kill myself.” In The Company She Keeps, Meg attempts to see the disturbing sex with the bourgeois, middle-aged, chubby Mr. Breen in farcical terms: “She could accept and even, wryly, enjoy it. The world of farce was a sort of moral underworld, a cheerful, well-lit hell where a Fall was only a prat-fall after all” (111). McCarthy’s wry sense of humor allows her the distance necessary for satire.

Paul Giles, in his study on the influence of Catholicism in the arts, observes that writers such as McCarthy, James T. Farrell, and John O’Hara have been underrated by the dominant literary community because their fiction does not conform to the Protestant ethos that informs other American fiction. He admits that the “separatist ethos of Catholicism” is less apparent in their fiction than in earlier fiction by Catholic writers, but they “concern themselves more with the arrival of a Catholic sensibility within the central arenas of American social and political life” (428). He defines this sensibility in various ways, including the interconnectedness of lives with social and historical events (as opposed to the rugged individualism of “Protestant” American literature) which results in

characters who are at times objectified and “implicated within the rituals of their time whether they like it or not” (457). Inadvertently, then, the Catholic sensibility as it is realized in these American writers is one that distrusts the American belief (as well as the Roman Catholic dogma) in individual free will. McCarthy’s characters become types or objects, which explains the repeated complaint that her characters are flat, tossed around by their historical-cultural-religious moment.

The idea that we are fated to respond a certain way, or *not* respond to various situations, is one that implicitly goes against the Catholic belief in free will: without free will, one is not free to confess and repent. But there is an underside to this belief, particularly the Jansenist influenced Irish-Catholicism: that we are perhaps not as free as it seems, that God’s grace is given to people randomly, and that no matter how good you are you can’t earn it. We see this in Flannery O’Connor’s fiction where the Christian character, like the Grandmother in “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” is offered grace right before her gruesome murder *in spite of* her superficial Christian goodness and Southern-bred racism. This is a Calvinistic philosophy of election that conflicts not only with a less rigid American Protestantism, but also with Catholicism’s basic belief in free will. Yet the tragic inevitability of fate is recognized not only by Western European peasant communities, including Ireland, but it is particularly resonant to those Americans who related to Freudian psychology, and the question of whether or not we can control our behavior, whether there are any “pure acts.” As Flannery O’Connor puts it:

Free will does not mean one will, but many wills conflicting in one man. Freedom cannot be conceived simply. It is a mystery and one which the novel, even a comic novel, can only be asked to deepen ... the Catholic novelist believes that you destroy your freedom by sin; the modern reader believes, I think, that you gain it in that way.

(Mystery 116)

It is not that her characters are determined and there is no hope of change, but that the ability to be free takes determination, and perhaps an inner strength that for O'Connor came from God.

Gordon and McCarthy, being much more secular than O'Connor, do not see the possibility of looking for God for that strength, yet their characters struggle with those many inner wills as much as O'Connor's, just on different playing grounds. In pondering her accidental support of Trotsky, and her accidental marriage to Wilson, McCarthy's moral sensibility always tried to distinguish between good actions and bad, willed or not willed:

Is it really so difficult to tell a good action from a bad one? I think one usually knows right away or a moment afterward, in a horrid flash of regret. And when one genuinely hesitates--or at least it is so in my case--it is never about anything of importance, but about perplexing trivial things, such as whether to have fish or meat for dinner, or whether to take the bus or subway to reach a certain destination, or whether to wear the beige or the green. The "great" decisions--those I can look back on pensively and say, "That was a turning-point"--have been made without my awareness. Too late to do anything about it, I discover I have chosen. ("My Confession" 76)

McCarthy and her heroines often act without thinking, as if they have no control, or they have relinquished control, over their actions. Despite their *reason*, they choose men who will control them, "fated to make these terrible decisions will-lessly driven into postures of masochism and submission" (Pratt 48), as Meg Sargent is fated to act like her Aunt Clara, as Martha Sinnot is fated from the start of the novel to return to the scene of her first

marriage. The idea that they are different than their mothers (or aunts) or the people around them is false; like everyone else, they cannot control their destinies by sheer will. Alison Lurie sees McCarthy's life as embodying the idea that it is "possible to choose your own life and your own character, regardless of what happened to you," but McCarthy's fiction does not support this. For example her recognition that her first husband's professional failure echoed his father's academic downfall (portrayed fictionally in *Harald of The Group*), and because of *that*, during their marriage they together took part in the left wing lifestyle: "to which we felt superior, which we laughed at, but which nevertheless was influencing us without our being aware of it" ("My Confession").

In *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, and in her essays collected in *Writing on the Wall*, McCarthy examines this issue of free will further. In the former she recognizes the connection between lying about the drink of water before her first Communion, and every moral crisis since: "When I supposed I was damned, I was right, damned, that is, to a repetition or endless re-enactment of that conflict between excited scruples and inertia of will" (21). Later, she gives the definition of her name: Mary means bitter or star of the sea, Theresa means Little Flower, and reflects, with some humor tinged with seriousness, on the Catholic notion of the influence of names on personality:

Names have more significance for Catholics than they do for other people...The saint a child is named for is supposed to serve, literally, as a model or pattern to imitate; your name is your fortune and it tells you what you are or must be. Catholic children ponder their names for mystic meaning, like birthstones... .(129)

In her essay, "General Macbeth" McCarthy reads Shakespeare for the lessons he teaches about the destructive tendency of the will to align itself with abstractions or ideal; and, as she said in an interview, "[t]he assertion of any absolute idea is really a claim on the part of

the mind to control the world, to control reality” (qtd. in Gross 35). Thus the evilness and pathos, according to McCarthy, of *Lady Macbeth* stem from her desire to use her will in order to gain power, and “[a]fter the first crime, her will subsides, spent; the devil has brought her to climax and left her” (9). The religious and sexual allusions are evidence of McCarthy’s distrust of the will and sexual pessimism, and the idea that the we can will control of our lives is ultimately an illusion.

Norman Podhoretz notes that the more a McCarthy heroine knows about herself, the less control she has over her actions, particularly as she relates to men: Meg, Martha and McCarthy herself all end up in bed with men they dislike (*The Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt*, Miles Murphy, and Edmund Wilson); Kay of *The Group* marries Harald although she knows she does not love him, nor does he love her. Podhoretz sees this as related to McCarthy’s Catholicism, and the impotence of reason and good motives versus instinct, a theme used by “theologians from Augustine to Tillich to prove that man without grace is helpless against the Devil” (“Gibbsville” 272).

The Company She Keeps (1942) is a collection of stories that are linked together by the common character of Meg Sargent. Each displays a different fragment of her personality, although she is identifiably herself, if only because of her continued self-examination. On the original jacket cover of the 1942 novel, the description of the last chapter, “Ghostly Father, I Confess” summarizes the theme of the novel:

psychologically she has come to a dead end and can only act and reenact the childhood drama of estrangement that has left her permanently in doubt of her moral identity, turned her into a human chameleon who can only know herself vicariously, through those whose company she keeps.
(qtd. in Crowley 113)

Meg Sargent romantically believes that she has the freedom to break away from her past, roughly similar to McCarthy's own orphaned past, and make her own choices, become "myne owne womyn well at ease." But at the end she fears that her true self has been determined by her past, and she is doomed, as McCarthy recognized in her first autobiography, to repeat the moral decisions and events of the past. Her internalization of this fatalism stems from both Catholicism and psychology, and in any event, undermines her self-esteem. When she does visit an analyst, Dr. James, they desperately avoid discussing her childhood:

The subject frightened them both, for it suggested to them that the universe is mechanical, utterly predictable, frozen, and this in its own way is quite as terrible as the notion that the universe is chaotic. It is essential for our happiness, she thought, to have both the pattern and the loose ends... . (262)

A Charmed Life (1954) is an ironic fable about the dangers of doubt, not just in God, but in one's self. Seven years after her divorce from the devilish Miles Murphy, Martha Sinnot (whose name is apt for a parable) returns to the charmed town of New Leeds with her second husband, John, in hopes of becoming pregnant. Within months she has sex with Miles, and becomes pregnant. Like Meg, Martha Sinnot is reluctantly hopeful--reluctant because she fears that free will is an illusion. She is tired of seeing the truths that always got in the way of hope; although she recognizes such insight as a sign of maturity, "she didn't care for it, she would rather be dead" (22). Echoing Flannery O'Connor's sentiment that humans have conflicting wills, Martha has both the hopeful, romantic side of Meg, yet also the fatalistic side, neither of which is very helpful or mature, despite what she thinks: "The fatalistic side of her character accepted Miles as a punishment for the sin of having slept with him when she did not love him..." (103).

Martha's move to New Leeds to begin with is fated, as she herself seems to acknowledge. What is unacknowledged, however, is that she had previously had an abortion as a result of an affair, foreshadowing her aborted abortion at the end of the novel. And most interestingly, Eleanor, the woman who crashes into Martha's car, is the same redheaded woman at Sandy's child custody trial. Rumor had it at the trial that she had once crashed into a car with three pregnant women. Fate is not merely something the McCarthy heroine gives into, but an outside force, beyond control.

The women of McCarthy's best-selling novel The Group (1963) were educated to believe that they have autonomous selves, as well as the Vassar educations and privileged backgrounds to do what they want in life. Ironically, this makes them less free than their mothers, who are portrayed much more positively than the daughters. All the girls have blithely escaped any religious and parental controls, yet are still controlled and still unfulfilled. The novel begins with Kay's wedding and ends with her wake, a plot structure that is also formed by an Irish-American sensibility, usually because family gatherings are the best venues for exposing family relationships. But Kay effectively has no family. Kay is the McCarthy figure who has escaped her second generation, middle-class parents, and reached, however precariously, the upper class through Vassar and her friends. But she is not completely assimilated; she is foiled by the conflicting internal desires of idealism and security. The other members of the group also relinquish their dreams and retreat to the security of authority. Dottie blindly follows a man she has just met to his apartment and gives up her virginity without an even a guilt-induced, struggle; later, despite herself, she falls in love with him, but refuses to do anything about it, marrying an older man for shelter. Surprisingly, her mother prefers that Dottie test her love for the young lover before she marries the older man; she fears that Dottie is repeating some "dreadful pattern" by retreating into safety. "You'd like God to arrange for you to have something that you know would be wrong for you if you chose it of your own free will" (182). The other mothers are equally liberated. Priss' mother was thrilled at the

invention of bottled milk for babies, and she watches with horror as her daughter succumbs to her own husband's strict, sadistic, breast feeding schedule. Kay Peterson's husband, Harald, despite himself, repeats the professional failures of his father. Polly allows fate to decide if Gus would visit her one night. And then "Fate sealed the night she got her father's letter. Fate had sent her father as a sign that it would be kind to her so long as she did not think of men or marriage" (299). In fact all the members in the Vassar group allow fate to lead the way. Even the seemingly strong ones, are no better: As Doris Grumbach wryly points out, Lakey's lesbianism is probably the result of a Vassar teacher telling her to live without love (50). The irony is that, like any college-educated, upper-class woman, they all believe they have free will.

The Analogical Imagination

In his study, *The Analogical Imagination* (1981), David Tracy's thesis is that the Catholic imagination is analogical, discerning grace incarnate in material things, stemming from the essential Catholic tenet of Transubstantiation. This is apparent in the spirituality Hemingway endows his bulls, Fitzgerald his rich girls, Joyce his everydayness, and Cullinan her house of gold. Mary McCarthy is not unaware of the significance of things, and the *false* spirituality her heroines and heroes invest in them. Particularly in *The Group*, although all her fiction has bits of it, the lists and descriptions of the mundane world of objects are used to describe personalities, to embody ideas, and to act as "moral guideposts" (Hardwick 3). Norine's living room is described in such detail, not just for humor (though it is funny), and not just to make us dislike her (although she is dislikable, at times she is brutally, and precisely honest), but to embody all that is wrong with her and the historical time her decor reflects: her superficial adherence to some beliefs at the cost of what McCarthy believes are more transcendent beliefs.

McCarthy has asserted in her essays that the novel form itself should be concerned with reality, "the actual world, the world of fact, of the verifiable, of figures, even, and

statistics.” Any reader of McCarthy will never forget the flying diaphragm scene, the missing underwear button, the salmon meatloaf recipe. And it is precisely these lists that morally conscious writers use to identify character. She makes a distinction, however, in her essay “Settling the Colonel’s Hash,” between literary and natural symbols, referring to the former as so unfixed and abstract in meaning that they can and do mean whatever the individual reader wants them to mean: “In this dream forest, symbols become arbitrary; all counters are interchangeable; anything can stand for anything else.” She defends her definition of natural symbols, symbols that are the result of condensing an anecdote, where analogy is used to fix an absolute meaning between the object or idea and the symbol--she refers to Transubstantiation in her argument that Bloom is Ulysses, not a symbol of Ulysses, but rather a symbol of Joyce’s belief in eternal recurrence. These natural symbols, however, are not always so rich-- McCarthy defends the hash dinner ordered by the anti-Semitic Colonel in “Artists in Uniform” as simply being a real man’s meal, identifying him as especially masculine, reflecting his opposition to McCarthy as a woman, and as what he calls a “Jew-lover.” Natural symbols help the reader to quickly identify the particular moral weakness, or strength, or identifying feature of the character about to be satirized.

“Artists in Uniform”

McCarthy’s 1953 brilliant autobiographical essay, “Artists in Uniform,” reflects many of the thematic concerns of much Irish-American fiction. For this work alone she is an exemplary model for the tradition. It is a parable whose stated moral is “Pride as usual, preceded my fall.” The drama occurs in the 1950s, with McCarthy traveling on one of her endless cross-country train rides when she meets an Irish-American colonel who is regaling the all-male club car with his pronouncements on the evil threat of Communism, especially in academia, and especially among the Jews. McCarthy pedantically takes up the challenge, the “missionary usefulness,” to teach him the objective truth; however,

she is foiled by her subconsciously selected artistic clothing, which reveals one of her biases, and her hubris, which prevents her from mentioning either her Irish (at first, because she sees the Irish as a minority, like the Jews, and she wants the Colonel himself to recognize his minority status in the face of what she believes is her majority opinions) or her Jewish (denying both her Jewish Grandmother, and, a potential bias in her moral argument) heritages to the anti-semitic Irish-American Colonel. The now-chastened McCarthy, speaking of the self on the train, foolishly believed that she could transcend her heritage, "the concept that man is more than his circumstances, more even than himself."

McCarthy, as is her habit, learned many lessons from this moral drama. She learned that she cannot defend the Jews without being anti-semitic herself in denying that they possess absolutely no particular characteristics specific to their own religious and cultural heritage: "this would mean that they had no history and no culture, a charge which should be leveled against them only by an anti-Semite." She recognizes the influence of cultural patterns: "Jewish humor, Jewish rationality." Her pride leads her to the position of denying Jews an identity, while also revealing her unsteady belief in complete transcendence over fate. Jews, like artists, are formed by their own cultures, as McCarthy reveals in "Settling the Colonel's Hash," an essay in response to criticism of her autobiographical story, so they must retain their individuality, their bias, and not be forced to blend or assimilate.

She learns that she shares with the Colonel a lack of faith, though his has been replaced with what the nuns had warned her would be a "godless materialism," the belief in man-made ideology and distinctions. She recognizes in horror that his adoption of the pragmatic over the spiritual has created a monster, one that looks, perhaps, too much like herself in her position of authority and "missionary usefulness." Thus, after their ill-fated lunch when her failure to enlighten him reveals her unacknowledged self, she tells him her married name:

“Broadwater... .”

“‘Broadwater?’ shouted the Colonel, with a dazed look of unbelief and growing enlightenment; he was not the first person to hear it as a Jewish name... .”

As her penance, she permits him the score.

Mary McCarthy, according to one biography, enjoyed the fiction of James T. Farrell and F. Scott Fitzgerald, two Irish-American writers who shared her moral sensibility. Although McCarthy may not have been conscious of the connections between these writers and herself, she shares with them their didacticism, self-criticism, and strict morality. Like Fitzgerald, she desires to be part of an elite, whether social, political, intellectual, yet at the same time she recognizes each group’s amorality and hypocrisies. Like Farrell, she is anxiously aware of the historical and social forces that inevitably nibble at free will.

McCarthy’s satire is Irish-American satire as seen in Flannery O’Connor, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Mary Gordon: its goal is not the destruction of a character, an institution or an idea, but an attempt to improve it or the reader. The didacticism of 19th century Irish-American writers thus takes on a more subtle transformation in 20th century fiction.

Mary Gordon

At a family funeral, Mary Gordon’s uncle took the time to express his opinion of her work:

“I just want to tell you that I can’t stand your books. None of us can. I tried the first one, I couldn’t get past the first chapter. The second one I couldn’t even get into; I didn’t even want to open it up. I didn’t even buy it; I wouldn’t waste my money.” (“I Can’t Stand 26)

Mary Gordon was reared in the orthodox Irish-Catholic Church which drastically changed with Vatican II (1962-65). She is an identifiable Catholic writer in both her moral sensibility and her subject matter. In both her fiction and essays, Gordon explores the relationship between being a woman, being Catholic, being a writer, and the tensions that result from these very different positions. She sees the Catholic Church as a powerful influence, and yet ultimately a barrier to those women who were raised Catholic and want to write for the larger, non-Catholic, world. What she succeeds in doing is revising the Church to allow for her other cultural identities as a feminist and a novelist. And it is in this rewriting of her Catholicism that she most disturbs Catholic literary critics like Brenda Becker, John Mahon and Carol Iannone. In the self-righteous tones of the puritanical, American Catholic Church, they berate Gordon's self-absorbed characters for caring too much for personal happiness and being unable to love and care for others. Mahon believes that the heroines can't find shelter in God so they seek it in loveless sex and other women; the problem, to Mahon, is that neither they, nor Gordon, understands the substance of the teachings of the Church (54). Iannone, misreading Gordon's ambiguity toward feminist solutions, believes that she is replacing Catholic orthodoxy with feminist orthodoxy. Becker sees Gordon's lack of belief as the cause of her simplistic portrayal of Catholicism: "Here again is a wilted flower of Catholic girlhood just aching for defloration at the hands of modernity (with, I might add, so little guilt--even the reflexive, vestigial kind--that Miss Gordon surely lost credibility points with fellow insiders)" (29). Like the uncle at the family funeral, the critics misread Gordon; all her heroines have an ambiguous desire for modernity, and it is their guilt that holds them back.

Gordon good naturedly accepts criticism like this. An orthodox Catholic upbringing gave her a strong sense of the security of a closed community, yet it also forced her to leave the Catholic community in order to become a writer. The critics above, all Catholic, two Irish, and two writing for Catholic publications, have been able to write without disassociating themselves from the Church. Yet all three are critics, not

novelists. For Gordon, American Catholicism is Irish Catholicism, especially in such public figures as John F. Kennedy and Cardinal O'Connor as the models; and the Irish distrust of her fiction, which is considered too revealing, forced her to accept her family's distance from what they considered her "dirty books." Accepting disapprobation by the Church, fellow Catholic writers, and her family is difficult for the admittedly family-oriented Gordon, and the theme of belonging and not belonging can be found in many of her novels.

Even though she is no longer a practicing Catholic, Gordon does not deny the influence of Catholicism in her life, on her writing, and in shaping her morality: "I consider myself a Catholic. I have a real religious life in a framework which I think of as Catholic" (Schreiber 26). In most Catholic-subject novels published after Vatican II, the authors look back in anger, ridicule and/or nostalgia at their Orthodox Catholic upbringing. Sheed has written that in these writers, the Church is portrayed "as a multi-layered poem or vision which dominates your life equally whether you believe it or not" (Sheed 260). Future generations of Catholic writers will have different reactions to their more liberal religious training. Most of Gordon's novels and essays deal with the moral issues that concern her as a result of her Catholic upbringing. In her first novel, Final Payments (1978), the heroine is formed by religion--and is dominated by the letter rather than the spirit of the Catholic concept of charity. In The Company of Women (1980), where the heroine fights the battle between the spirit, enforced upon her by a well-meaning, yet domineering father-figure, and the flesh, inherent in human relations, Catholicism is gendered. In Men and Angels (1985), where the non-Catholic heroine again tries to achieve a balance between the spirit and the flesh, religion can become a potentially dangerous fanaticism. The Other Side (1989) is a portrait of the indelible influences of family, religion and culture on several generations of the MacNamara family. And in The Rest of Life (1993) Catholicism is firmly in the past, a piece of nostalgia more than a powerful force. One of the most important and controversial results of Gordon's Catholic

themes is that they have opened the doors to the uninitiated and allowed them to see Catholicism as both a way of thought and a "discipline of life with rituals and restraints" (Breslin xiv). It is this disclosure of secrets, especially to a perceived hostile, and secular, audience, that most disturbs Gordon's Irish-American Church and family.

Mary Gordon's Irish-American Fiction

The Protestants

In Final Payments, Gordon distinguishes between Irish-Catholics and Protestant or secular Americans, making it clear that Isabel faces the benefits and pitfalls of assimilation into what she perceives is a homogenous, monolithic American mainstream. The novel opens with a typical Irish-American trope: the funeral of Isabel's father, Professor Moore. His daughter has spent eleven years caring for him since he had a stroke after catching her in bed with his prized student. She is now twenty-nine and free to leave the security of her orthodox Catholic father's house to enter the free but potentially dangerous secular world. The novel is a parable of how a young Catholic girl recreates herself, revising the Marian ideal of self-sacrifice, after Vatican II, which many Catholics feared was the demise of the Church. Isabel's sense of loss is underscored by the guilt she feels at being at least part of the cause of her father's stroke.

In order to illustrate the vast cultural differences that Isabel must navigate in her journey from the pre-Vatican II orthodox Church to the post-Vatican II secular society, Gordon needs to emphasize clear distinctions between Irish-Catholic and Protestant-American culture; her generalizations about Catholics and Protestants range from negative to idealistic. Gordon begins to set up this dichotomy with Isabel's remark, a mixture of pride and distaste, that "working class Irish are always defending something, probably something indefensible--the virginity of Mary, the C.I.A.--which is why their parties always end in fights" (19). As detailed in the previous chapter with McDermott's At Weddings and Wakes, this trait of defensiveness replaces or spills into emotional

defensiveness over perceived past wrongs, making family gatherings, such as weddings and wakes, potentially dangerous occasions. Yet Isabel quickly leaves the neighborhood to enter the non-Catholic world. Tellingly, she moves only as far as upstate New York, close to where her childhood friend Liz lives, for some sort of anchor to her past.

Gordon uses pithy or associative descriptions much as F. Scott Fitzgerald did to emphasize the essential Irishness of her characters, as if such a physical trait represented a psycho-cultural trait. Isabel's friend Eleanor has "thin, Irish lips invented for mourning" while Liz's "mouth was another kind of Irish trick, brimming with mockeries as her eyes flicked up and down, scanning for foolishness like radar" (15). Isabel, Liz and Eleanor all have their arguments with the church and not one of them maintains the sacraments. But because Liz was at least married in the Church, her mocks and jeers are acceptable: "Even Liz's irreverence was part of the charm of the picture; it was an Irish tradition, a lightning rod that channeled the energy of doubt to a safe grounding" (88).

Two non-Catholics that Isabel encounters are Hugh, her married lover, and her co-worker Lavinia, whose name even bespeaks her old American past. Besides having "wonderful bones," she says "'damned' like a Protestant, like an American" (120, 134). Here Isabel is responding as much to a class difference as a religious one with Lavinia, who comes from money. At other times in the novel, Isabel feels almost a foreigner compared to Protestant Americans. She fears that during a getting-acquainted lunch with Lavinia she would "have to explain about my father to someone to whom the word 'orthodoxy,' for example, might be utterly foreign, for whom the concept of authority was either public or menacing" (134). And later she ponders over her first celebration of Thanksgiving: "It was a Protestant holiday, an American holiday, my father had said, and we were Catholics, with a tradition that was rich and ancient and had nothing to do with cold, thin-blooded Puritans sitting down somewhere in New England" (160).

After her affair with Hugh is discovered by his wife, Isabel retreats from the world for a bizarre reenactment of her eleven years as caretaker for her father. She moves in

with Margaret, who embodies the worst of Catholicism, its self-absorption, dogmatic beliefs, sentimentalism, bleeding Jesuses. Yet she also was a part of Isabel's past, when the world was smaller, less free, but more certain. By living with Margaret she can atone for her perceived guilts—for firing Margaret, for sleeping with her father's student, for leaving her father's house. But the priest's words at the Easter Mass save her, allow her to reinterpret Catholicism with the help of a secular, or American, perspective. At the end of the novel, Isabel is seen leaving Margaret's house with Liz and Eleanor, giving the money from the sale of her father's house to Margaret, adopting the American definition of charity over the Catholic one of self-sacrifice. Yet, she is, at the end, still part of an Irish-Catholic culture, separate from the Protestant Americans, whom, although she learns from them, she does not truly understand. Although she is resisting the parts of her heritage that are restrictive, she is not leaving it entirely.

The dichotomy between Irish-Catholics and American-Protestants appears again in Gordon's second novel. Gordon's semi-autobiographical second novel, The Company of Women, describes the late marriage of Gordon's/Felicitas's parents in upstate New York where their good friend, a priest, had a church; the death of Gordon's/Felicitas's father when she was a young girl; and the working-class, Irish-Catholic parish in Queens where Gordon/Felicitas was reared. The parish is tightly-knit: Felicitas' mother works for a man from the parish, and everybody knows everyone else. Like Isabel, Felicitas doesn't meet a Protestant American until she leaves home. But even before she goes to college, her mentor, Father Cyprian, warns her about the infiltration of Protestant values into Catholicism. He says that the Catholic pamphlets Muriel (another clingy, demanding Margaret figure) gives her in the hospital are "sentimental. They exalted the American heresy that God could be found through athletics. They encouraged, he said, an Elks Club spirituality. They ignored the truth that we must hate the world to love God" (69). Even at the end of his life, when he begins to regret his past, believing that his order of

priests has changed for the worst because of its success: “[a] typically American error” (268).

As a result of his anger toward Protestant-Americans, Felicitas’s rebellion inevitably includes an attraction to anything non-Irish-Catholic. She believes that her non-Catholic Professor Gifford, another Lavinia, “had never needed anything” (136), unlike all the Catholic women she knows who desperately need God, Cyp, each other. Robert Cavendash, the political science professor she falls in love with, is not only Protestant, but, like Lavinia, from an upper-class background; once again, the idealization of Protestants reflects the Irish-American literary tradition of class consciousness.

She could tell by the way he spoke about Rousseau that his learning had been granted him in leisure. And there was no hint of apology for learning, no shadow-boxing with invisible old neighbors, no fear of sins of pride or loss of spiritual purity in exchange for what he knew. (100)

His immediate attraction to Felicitas is because of his desire for what she no longer valued in her culture:

...the hot twisted world of villains and great heroes. The world she was trying to leave. He said his learning had been cold. The heat of hers had come from the hot flesh of martyrs, and it stank of burning. She envied him his cool Octobers with high-minded scholars who were thin and blue-veined and whose flesh was calm. (100)

Like Isabel, however, Felicitas never makes it to the upper-class Protestant American world, but retreats back to her neighborhood, now transplanted upstate, and marries a dull, but Irish-Catholic, man.

Anne Foster of Men and Angels and the nameless narrator of "Immaculate Man" are Gordon's only identifiably non-Catholic protagonists. Anne is really just secular, however, and so similar to Isabel and Felicitas that her Protestantism is merely a cloak for her totally unreligious background. The nameless narrator, however, is forced to examine her Protestantism because of her affair with Father Clement. She describes herself as American, raised on pragmatism, and it is she who idealizes the Catholic sensibility, at least that of Catholics like the traditional, pre-Vatican II, Father Clement. She sees Catholicism as having "objects and characters, fuller, richer, more adorned than hers, but over gone" (17). Unlike the previous characters, who yearned for the upper-class, Protestant-secular world that is dominant in American culture, this narrator is merely pondering nostalgically over a lost cause. In doing so, however, she is questioning the her own Protestant and secular upbringing. She describes a Congregational service, contrasting it to a Catholic Mass:

...the words were comprehensible. Things were as visible as possible. Plainness was urged and prized. We were banishing the darkness: it was what we were about, large, fair Americans... We didn't believe in darkness. If you shone a light, the darkness would disappear. Or if you shone it in the right place, shadows would be seen to be only shadows. Nothing. (20)

The Irish-American Family

Gordon's nostalgia in this novella for the church she grew up with is reflected in her recent autobiographical essay, "The Important Houses," although here she is not looking back at her childhood with nostalgia. The focus of her anger is on her maternal Irish grandmother, a woman who resembles Ellen MacNamara in the Irish immigrant family saga, The Other Side, Gordon's contribution to the one day in the life of an Irish-

American family literary motif. As grandmother McCarthy avoided the subject Mary's parents' deaths, this grandmother did not wish to talk about Gordon's father's death, which seemed to the young Gordon to be forgotten by everyone except herself: Gordon's mother seemed pleased to be living back at her own mother's house. The portrait of her grandmother contains every stereotype about the Irish-American matriarch, from her simmering internal anger to her lace-curtain pretensions. Yet in her stubborn, Irish way, her grandmother refused to use the bathroom preferring the old-fashioned commode in her room, while the "kitchen was a monument to her refusal to accept the modern world" (35). The living room and dining room were merely for display, and then only for holidays; though this fact alone was common in many middle-class households in the 1950s, it was particular present in lace-curtain Irish homes. The Irishness is in Gordon's description of the decor:

There were no pictures in the living room or in the dining room
or in the halls or on the stairways or on the front or side porches.
The pictures, all religious, were clustered together in my
grandmother's small bedroom...The room was particularly
frightening at night. (37)

There were music books in one room, but Gordon doesn't remember anyone singing in that house. Her grandmother rarely spoke, spending her free time sewing, though "[n]othing she sewed was for me, nothing was for anyone I knew" (35). She did not need to speak to show displeasure or judgment: "her daughters with their cruel tongues, her sons with their strong backs took care of everything" (39). Gordon gives us one very disturbing anecdote, one that distinguishes the Irish-American matriarch from, say, the Jewish- or Italian-American one. Her grandmother would always let young Mary make, and then burn, a cookie:

What was she trying to show me? That I could try and try but would never be as good as she? That I should not have trusted her? That I should always keep an eye out, because whatever I did in life would be my own affair? It never occurred to me that the situation could be any different. My grandmother's implacable posture made the idea of alternative impossible. What was, was. Because it had to be. (35)

Thus a certain brand of Irish fatalism is passed on from grandmother to granddaughter.

The Other Side extends the portrait of the Irish-American grandmother to the effects on the entire family--the tension and vengefulness, and the "obsession with concealment" ("I Can't Stand" 1). Ellen and Vincent MacNamara are Irish immigrants, forced by painful familial circumstances to leave Ireland. They meet in New York, and eventually marry, perpetuating their buried anger and nostalgia onto their three children and numerous grandchildren. As one critic noted, the novel "sees unhappiness as the fatal attraction of the Irish in Ireland and America alike..." (Ibson xviii). Ellen's house, like herself, is a fortress against outsiders: rarely does anyone visit.

Each character is formed by their relationships to each other, particular to their parents. As in the typical Irish-American family, each member of the family is labeled fairly early, and the label's influence is so potent that the characters are incapable of change. Cam, the favored granddaughter, yet the daughter of an alcoholic, agoraphobic mother, is the only character who may change and only because she begins an affair with a non-Catholic, a Jewish man. Her privilege perhaps allows her to be the most conscious of the family's debilitating effects on the individual: "The net of kinship spread around them, spreads and draws. There is a place for everyone, she thinks, but not all places are equal and not everyone is happy with his place" (8). Ellen's anger and disappointment stem directly from her mother's physical and mental deterioration after several

miscarriages, and her father's desertion of his wife for a mistress and a business in town. The lesson she learns is that weakness makes you vulnerable, so she hides all emotion and feelings deep within her, her body as much a fortress as her house: "There must be a place, shored up, defended, reconstructed daily, where that thing that kept itself that was yourself, could stay intact . . . You kept it from the sight of others. You could not soften, open. You kept yourself held in" (114). Her anger is a result of this self-denial. Living in Ireland, she sees the poverty all around her, although she herself lives a relatively wealthy life because of her father's business. But working with him, she listens to the men who complain about their fates, and wish only greater misfortune on their neighbors, fueling her anger at life and mankind: "Every good thing for another is a blow to them. They crave a stupor, a calamity. Anything to break the rhythm of the life they strap themselves to like a wheel that turns and never stops" (130). Her anger follows her to America, where she gets involved, though only with the persistence of her Jewish friend, Bella, in unionizing for better working conditions and pay. And although in private her passion and anger and love of argument and words would push her to speak her mind ("Her angry politics--Words hard and blunt: stone axes" (41)), she could not speak in public, like Bella, or invite people over for meetings. Her weak self-esteem, the part of her she kept hidden, would not allow her to publicly reveal her emotions. She recognizes her inheritance of the Irish curse: "It was the worst curse in the world: Forget your efforts. Nothing will prevail" (135). Ellen does meet and passionately love Vincent, who saves her from total self-destruction, but who is unable to save their two daughters (Ellen, of course, adored her son, John) from her wrath.

Unlike her grandmother, Cam, who is a divorce attorney (a sign of her distance from the Church), is able to speak in public. But she is unable to have children because of a knife-wielding gynecologist, and thus is unable to choose the role of mother. Cam and her cousin Dan are favored and respected by Ellen, who skips her own daughters before she allows herself to love: Cam inherits Ellen's anger and judgmentalism, and Dan

is her dead son's only child. Ellen's daughter Theresa can never forgive her niece for being beloved by Ellen, the favored child automatically gaining an enemy in the unfavored one: "Ancestral, it would go on, and it would be passed down. There would be no end to it" (205). Darci and Staci, Dan's daughters, are doomed to repeat the sibling hatred, Darci being the favored daughter.

Cam learns at a young age, either through Ellen or through coping with her alcoholic mother, that "anything you possessed of value was in danger of begin taken away. Dissimulation seemed a duty. She began then to frown when she was reading so that no one would suspect her joy" (16). Unusual among Irish immigrants of their generation, Ellen and Vincent are relatively educated, and wouldn't have discouraged Cam from reading. However, most of the MacNamaras, in the tradition of second and third generation Irish, went into middle-class professions: law, nursing, business. One of Theresa's daughters, Sheila, became a nun, until she was publicly caught sleeping with a priest.

Cam saw that she inherited her judgmentalism in a direct line from Ellen, her aunt Theresa, herself (and we see it in the granddaughter, Staci), and recognizes it as part of her inheritance:

She understood the pleasures of judgment, the taste for condemnation like a taste for salt. A racial trait, she guessed, of preserving, self-preserving, Irish women. She'd seen them thrive on judgment, finding in it nutrition, healing, the reward for hours of exhaustion and for years of self-control. Refusing alcohol (they saw its devastations all around them), they filled themselves on judgment and known the lust for it, the utter pleasure of it, the buildup of excitement, as in sex, but unlike sex, the high sustainable plateau... The stories told by the women in her family

were always in the service of this: this judgment, without whose proximity they could not, any of them, think of pleasure. (57)

Unlike Ellen and Theresa, however, Cam is more self-conscious of this ultimately destructive trait, and she is saved by both that knowledge, and, in typical Gordon fashion, by a man, a Jewish man, echoing Gordon's own Jewish father. Ira is a twiced-divorced middle-aged man who is a charming, wonderful lover for Cam, and most importantly, content, unlike Cam's husband and all the men in her family. At first, Cam "suspects and judges [Ira] for his lack of judgment. How can she trust him when he is so rarely strict?" (60-1). But the tension builds inside her grandparents' home while the extended family waits for Vincent's homecoming from the nursing home he has been recuperating in, and she thinks only of escaping the self-accusations and guilt, as well as the judgments, to lie in her lover's arms. Ira mothers her, as his mother perhaps did for him, and for Cam this is a new experience. When she thinks of the Irish mothers and sons that she knows, she thinks of the man "being drowned or starved" (377). When she thinks of Ira, she believes that compared to the Jews, the Irish are "third-raters, or self-destructors. Flops" (59). In this novel Gordon deliberately sets up a tension between these two cultures, as she does with Catholics and Protestants in earlier novels, right from the start, an essentializing or stereotyping that is evident in much Irish-American fiction. The stress on cultural repetitions and inheritances is an effective way to illustrate what Hasia Diner calls "cultural persistence over time." In a description of Jack, a long-time friend of the MacNamaras, the narrator notes:

The scope of his political imaginings was local; if he were a Jew, he might have been a Communist, but he was Irish; his personal chastity extended to the public view; the immodest vision of an international solution caused him to recoil, as if he were observing an endless series

of random couplings. (18)

Cam, needless to say, is more inhibited sexually than her Jewish lover, Ira, though, like her grandmother, she is eventually quite passionate.

Cam's cousin Dan visits Ireland in an attempt, though not quite conscious, to come to terms with his family. When in college, he studies anthropology to learn about "the stories of people whose language was private," although he had yet to connect this with his family. Like Cam, he is the closest to Ellen, the matriarch, and his response to her, his heritage, his religion, while still warped, is more understanding than that of either of her daughters, who are too close to understand her: Magdelene calls Ellen in the middle of the night, complaining drunkenly of her childhood, and Theresa tells her comatose mother,

"You taught me I could count on nothing...

"So I decided I want nothing. I would hide everything I had. Open fondness for an object of love brought out my hate.

"I decided, Mother, to punish the crime of revealing desire, joy... ." (371)

Dan was not infected by Ellen's anger or neglected in Ellen and Vincent's undivided, desperate love for each other. Yet, he has inherited, even more than Cam, Ellen's discontent, though he blames it on the Irish:

Unhappiness was bred into the bone, a message in the blood, a code of weakness. The sickle-cell anemia of the Irish: they had to thwart joy in their lives. You saw it everywhere in Irish history; they wouldn't allow themselves to prosper. They didn't believe in

prosperity. Perhaps, he thought, they were right not to...the doomed service of the ideal, the blatant disregard of present pleasure. He could see it in their politics, their architecture, in the layout of their living rooms, their towns... (160)

Dan's wife divorces him, ostensibly because of an affair with his secretary, but effectively because she refuses to live in Queens for his law practice with Cam: she does not understand why he would want to stay so near his family, the source of his discontent. When he is forced by guilt from his affair with the secretary to live far out on Long Island, as far from Queens as possible, his discontent follows him: "They had been right, he thought, those people who had warned against pleasure. He had followed pleasure, and it had brought him here, desperate, and once again without a home" (189). The Irish-Catholic secretary refuses to marry him, so they live together, buried miserably beneath their mutual shame and guilt.

As the prototypical Irish-American matriarch, Ellen's inescapable influence on her extended family overpowers any influence her husband Vincent has. His sympathy with others, his earnestness, his love of creating things have landed here and there, but not enough to stick. He realizes that since he was a child, he has feared the present because to him it is so fleeting unlike the power of the past, and the looming future. He alone understands Ellen's past and is fated to be connected with her in the present and future. He spends the novel wondering why he is leaving the comfortable, modern shelter he has been recuperating in, for the house where his wife is dying. Vincent carried from Ireland the fatalism, the idea that there is no choice to be made, only the right and wrong choice, so he returns to Ellen and his family, knowing the accusations, guilts and tensions he will face. Earlier in his life, he deliberately does not tell his wife that he has seen his young partner down in the subway tunnel, killed by a train; he sees no good in telling her: "Vincent had always felt it was better to leave the stone in place. You didn't shift the

weight, because the movement would bring danger and the weight had goodness to it in that it pressed things down" (284). Throughout the novel, Vincent struggles to accept what he will inevitably do--return to Ellen and his family despite the comfort and peace he has at the nursing home. The novel ends with his return: "And he knows he is right to be there, that there never was a choice."

The Randomness of Life

The Other Side ends with Vincent's acceptance of inevitability; for him, however, it is not a tragic acceptance. Despite a similar distrust of free will, Gordon's characters tend to be more well-rounded, and have the ability to change thus they seem to have more free will than McCarthy's characters: the dilemma for them is how to access their wills. It is not that McCarthy's characters are strictly determined; she did allow them the epiphany, the sudden loop hole through which they could jump. However they rarely jump. Gordon's characters seem to fall back on fatalism whenever they get tired of taking responsibility for themselves; they don't have to be determined by their cultural and religious heritage if they do not want to.

For Gordon, although she is still concerned with the traditional sense of fate, fate is more specifically defined in the Catholic sense of grace. In her fiction, she ponders the randomness of luck and grace. Luck, like grace, is bestowed randomly, and personal actions as well as the logic of reason, have nothing to do with it. It is in this sense that we have no control.

Early in Final Payments, Isabel refuses to believe Freud's dictum that there are no pure acts nor accidents nor jokes. Isabel says, "Who wants all that control?" (102). She feels a distorted sense of guilt over her good looks, her luck, and this guilt, coupled with the guilt-inducing Catholic heritage, forces her to constantly seek absolution and penance. She sees her own life as "a crafted and yet random mix of calculation and chance" (13) much too complicated to understand. And to make up for the randomness

of life, she practices acts of penance throughout the novel: She forces herself to endure the odor of a homeless woman in Grand Central Station, a woman who obviously has not been graced with luck. She takes John's job offer because she fears showing ingratitude to chance, "against which breaches were clear and punishable" (82), and she feels sorry for the wicked Cynthia, wife of her lover Hugh, for having had less luck than she:

"People were happy, people were unhappy, for reasons no one could see, no one could do much about" (190). All this leads up to the worst act, what she thought would be the pure act, but clearly is, as Freud said, the end result of subconscious control repeating her celibate retreat of caring for her father, but this time with Margaret, a woman she doesn't love. She cuts off her hair as an act of self-punishment and penance. Isabel commits adultery, understandably leading to her subsequent guilt and penance, but the sin breaks up Hugh's destructive marriage and ultimately **frees** Isabel from her father and Margaret (Iannone 63). Gordon is revising Church dogma here: sin does not lead to Hell and Damnation, only to a Hell imposed by the self; in other words, Isabel does have control over her own actions and response to those actions.

The juxtaposition of fatalism and randomness in life, the idea that humans are composed of conflicting wills, some fixed, some free, is also seen in The Other Side, where the actions of each generation affect the following generations. In this novel, the effects are often tragic, as all the MacNamaras are determined by a previous ancestor's actions, destined to respond a certain way to life as a result of a parent or grandparent's choices. Unlike Isabel, who tentatively breaks out of a destructive pattern, these characters are irreparably formed. Ellen's hatred of the feminine is a result of her mother's bloody miscarriages and resulting physical deterioration; her daughters, raised by a mother who hated most women, retreated into alcohol and religion. The daughters of these damaged daughters were also harmed by their mothers: Theresa's daughter Marilyn searches for love with different, not Irish, men, while Magdalene's daughter, Cam, risks living a totally loveless, celibate life, save for the positive influence of her

grandmother, who is able to love Cam because of her intelligence and celibacy, and her grandfather, who teaches her to love the physical. But Cam only narrowly escapes with the help of her Jewish, not Irish, lover, Ira, who loves her, loves life, and is not fatalistic.

However, many of Gordon's heroines, despite the negative effects of their religious and cultural heritage, are able to change; they discover that they have the freedom to change and their lives do not have to be determined by the Church--the environment--or heredity. The concept of free will, of being able to change from a sinner by doing penance, is a strong, Catholic concept. It is anti-deterministic; ideally people can change, with God's grace. For Gordon, "God's grace" is seen in those characters who are lucky, lucky enough to have wit, beauty, or intelligence. Perhaps this is a secular version of grace. Yet grace is what minimizes the theory of free will for Gordon, and McCarthy. Without the intelligence and self awareness of a McCarthy heroine like Meg, or Isabel's luck and friends, there is little free will. But Gordon, unlike McCarthy, gives her characters access to change.

Conclusion

Gordon's Irish-American novels echo the same themes as the novels of Katherine Conway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, James T. Farrell, Elizabeth Cullinan, and Alice McDermott, and the plays of Eugene O'Neill. The Other Side in particular is Gordon's recognition of the inevitable influence of religious and cultural heritage, even one that seems to have been assimilated into the mainstream. Like McCarthy, who used the Catholic Encyclopedia for many of her allusions, Gordon did research on Irish immigrants and Irish-Americans, including studies used in this dissertation, by Hasia Diner and Kirby Miller.³ Ironically, in their attempt to connect certain sensibilities in their lives to a greater influential power of religion or culture, both McCarthy and Gordon

³ Carol Brightman admitted the former during an October 1992 lecture at the 92nd Street YM-YWCA in New York City, while Gordon gives Diner and Miller credit in the acknowledgments of The Other Side.

had to do research. Like their heroines, both writers simultaneously accept yet construct their “determined” identities.

Chapter Four

Mary McCarthy's Catholic Sensibility

Introduction

I consider myself an intellectual. I've always loved reading about other academics, other intellectuals, as if we could all be good friends if only we knew each other. Mary McCarthy has supplied readers like me with a window to a community of intellectuals, inviting us to join them, and then slamming the window once we've been lured inside. Not only does she use the secret language of intellectuals--foreign phrases, allusions, intellectual discourse--she nods to fellow Irish-Catholic girls with her ecclesiastical and cultural allusions. McCarthy writes to an educated audience about educated people, particularly in her works that are set in the 1930s, an obviously influential period in her career, as a young, Vassar graduate who was just discovering how to use her critical powers against any form of dishonesty.

Like several Irish-American writers, notably Fitzgerald and Hemingway, McCarthy's liberated social life contrasted with her moralistic, puritanical fiction. Ironically, although she herself lived the life of a bohemian girl, sleeping with many men, drinking, traveling, writing, it becomes increasingly clear that McCarthy, like the Church, was quite conservative. McCarthy effectively lost her faith at age fourteen, yet as an adult she continuously tested and rejected what can be seen as twentieth century replacements for the authority and promises of religion such as politics and psychoanalysis. As do many autobiographers, McCarthy detailed those incidents in her childhood that she believed set the psychological, intellectual and moral patterns of her life. In her most critically acclaimed work, Memories of a Catholic Girlhood (1957), she describes in painful detail how at age fourteen, she gets the priest to admit that there is a gap between faith and experience that cannot be filled with reason:

"Natural reason, Mary," expatiated Father Heeney, "will not take you the whole way today. There's a little gap that we have to fill with faith." I looked up at him measuringly. So there *was* a gap, then. How was it that they had never mentioned this interesting fact to us before? (123)

This gap both disturbed and obsessed McCarthy: even a quick glance at her novels and essays shows that her goal was to reveal this gap in all ideologies. She insisted yet doubted that reason could ever correct this discrepancy, and this tension is felt in her works and seen in her life. "Faith" by Catholic definition is a virtue that requires God's grace, not man's. McCarthy has written that The Group (1963) is a novel about the "loss of faith in technology." With that word, she is, whether consciously or not is not known, revealing the fatal flaw in belief in any ideology: God's grace is absent in any man-made ideology. Thus we have a Mary McCarthy story: often didactic, always satiric, usually witty attacks on liberal ideologies.

McCarthy's critical eye was particularly harsh on the bohemian, intellectual woman who toys with sex and politics in order to avoid an essential truth about herself or the world around her. We see this in her novels set in the Thirties such as The Company She Keeps, The Oasis, and The Group where her satiric wit is aimed at bohemian-intellectuals, utopists and Vassarites respectively. Interestingly, she never exposes in her fiction the group she is most familiar with--Catholics--considering she spent most of her early life in Catholic schools. But as critic Wilfrid Sheed once wrote, "A Catholic novelist need never mention Catholics. You can recognize the sensibility" (Cryer 21). McCarthy used what she found worthy in Catholicism and discarded the rest; however, she was unable to reject the most important influence since her moral perceptions and everyday actions were guided by her Catholic heritage. And in her strong sense of

morality, of punishment, of self-criticism, McCarthy's sensibilities are clearly influenced by Jansenistic, Irish-American Catholicism.

Although McCarthy does not reveal any secrets about the Church, she is known for speaking about the previously unspeakable. "As she was trying to fold the pessary, the slippery thing, all covered with jelly, jumped out of her grasp and shot across the room and hit the sterilizer" (The Group 73, though this chapter was first published in 1954 in Partisan Review). With Dottie's flying diaphragm McCarthy reveals both the mess behind sex as well as her own contempt for this technological breakthrough: the pessary hits the *sterilizer*, effectively sterilizing the act of sex itself of any pleasure. Philip Roth, who, like McCarthy, is both sexually obsessed and puritanical, alludes to this scene in Goodbye, Columbus (1959) where Neil is trying to get Brenda to go for a diaphragm:

"You can go to Margaret Sanger, in New York. They don't ask any questions."

"You've done this before?"

"No," I said. "I just know. I read Mary McCarthy."

"That's exactly right. That's just what I'd feel like, somebody out of *her*." (58)

Even before The Group was completed, McCarthy's reputation was secure.

As an orphan reared in an Irish-Catholic household for much of her childhood, McCarthy learned that self-illusions are punished: her idealic, spoiled childhood ends with the death of her parents; she is punished for receiving a state prize for her first published essay at age ten ("The Irish in American History"); her first sexual romance turns out to be with a bum. Yet because of her idealized perception of her first six years of life, she has some hope: she is both wary of illusions and hopeful that she's wrong, making her a very cynical romantic. As her friend Elizabeth Hardwick notes, "There was the sentimental

and romantic streak in her nature” and “she had a dreamy expectation that persons and nations should do their best...” (4, 6). And one of her biographers noted that her novels “display[ed] her disappointment that people are not what they profess to be” (Hardy 212). This disparity between her idealism and the bitter reality bothered her not only within herself but in other people, and since self-deception is effectively a condition of human life, McCarthy attacked it with satire.

Early in her career, as a young college graduate pompously criticizing the New York theater for Partisan Review, McCarthy perhaps reveals the impetus for her satire:

All dramatic realism is somewhat sadistic; an audience is persuaded to watch something that makes it uncomfortable and from which no relief is offered--no laughter, no tears, no purgation. This sadism had a moral justification, so long as there was the question of the exposure of a lie. (Theatre 227-8)

And that is exactly what McCarthy does in her fiction--expose lies, expose people who do not respect reality.

She grew up with two storytellers: Grandma Preston, whose stories always were self-mocking (“she was both butt and heroine” Memories 214), and Grandma McCarthy whose “most trivial reminiscences... received from her delivery and from the piety of the context a strongly monitory flavor; they inspired guilt and fear, and one searched uncomfortably for the moral in them, as in a dark and middling fable” (Memories 162-3). The nuns at St. Joseph’s gave her Bible and saint stories, while the Sacred Heart nuns introduced her to European literature. Her father read children’s stories to her (and perhaps told a few about himself as well), and her grandfather gave her free access to his rather canonical literature collection. It was only natural that McCarthy would eventually

turn to storytelling, though like her grandmother McCarthy, the stories are morality tales, and the target is often a heroine who greatly resembles McCarthy herself.

Many of McCarthy's heroines seek the authority and comfort of contemporary ideological beliefs. And many of them, like McCarthy, are able to see through their own illusions: Catholicism, psychotherapy, progressive ideals and utopist politics all fail McCarthy's ultimate moral test of self-analysis and blunt honesty. Many communists, especially the intellectual members of the Thirties, were so accepting of Stalinist lies that they lost their sense of critical reasoning, and were unable to see the danger of their uncritical faith. F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote in a letter to his daughter that "Communism has become an intensely dogmatic and almost mystical religion... ." (*Crack Up* 290). Her critical response to her Catholic childhood taught McCarthy to be sensitive to the dangers of uncritical faith as portrayed in her novels: faith in political ideology, faith in psychoanalysis, faith in technology, faith in social progress--all are faithfully deconstructed.

Mary McCarthy is usually called a novelist of manners, rather than a philosophical writer, although I believe that McCarthy was reaching for a combination of the two.¹ One qualification for this type of novelist is that the social range of the characters must be narrowed to allow for a focused target. This narrow scope is evidence of her inherent conservatism, especially if one sees the use of satire as an idealistic desire to improve the status quo, not destroy it. McCarthy chooses not only the type of people she is most familiar with, but those that are the least vulnerable: she judges, as Benjamin DeMott put it, the "well brought up types" ("Poets" 98). Perhaps her limited focus restricted her development as a writer, and made her moral philosophy simplistic, but it was necessary for her to do so in her continuous attempt to bridge the gap between the idealistic and the realistic.

¹ McCarthy's friendship with the German intellectual and philosopher Hannah Arendt is documented in *Between Friends: The Correspondence of Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy: 1949-1975*, edited by Carol Brightman (Harcourt Brace 1995).

From her autobiographical writings, it is clear that McCarthy had an ambiguous attachment to the various groups she was attracted to--the intellectuals, the radicals, the Vassar girls. She had spent her early years as the outsider, not clearly part of any group, not even a family. She was an orphan in a Dickensian household, a Catholic girl in her Protestant grandfather's home, a woman from the West at an Eastern college, the "bourgeois" Trotskyite, theater critic. Michiko Kakutani notes, during a 1987 interview that:

When it is pointed out that all her novels involve groups of one sort or another--closed communities of bohemian artists, academics and so on--she acknowledges that some underlying longing for family definition might, just might, have something to do with it. But she would prefer to think of the phenomenon as a manifestation of her "political utopianism." (Conversations 263)

The contradictions are clear: she desires to be a part of a small community, to join every cause, but her fiction satirizes every group she joined; intellectuals and radicals, two groups to which she undoubtedly belonged, are both guilty of living by theoretical abstractions, not reality, and become easy McCarthy targets.

McCarthy bases much of her personal moral philosophy on the orthodox Catholicism of her childhood. Most of her characters have to come to some sort of moral decision: a morality of self-sacrifice for the benefit of others--a loyalty to a community rather than self that comes in some way from McCarthy's incompletely discarded Catholic morality. For McCarthy, the right decision is always the most difficult one. One interviewer noted in 1981 that

She believed and still does, that (in Martha Sinnot's words [a character in McCarthy's A Charmed Life]), "the hardest course was the right one; in her experience, this was almost an invariable law. If her nature shrank from the task, if it hid and cried piteously for mercy that was a sign that she was in the presence of the ethical."

(Conversations 215)

Even in her novels where she seems to speak out on political views, the substance of the political thought is replaced by her moral views. Meg Sargent is a Trotskyist for simple ethical reasons: poor Trotsky deserves a fair trial.

McCarthy's only male hero, Peter Levi in Birds of America (1971) attempts, unsuccessfully, to live his life according to Kantian ethics, "a beautiful structure, based on a law of harmony and inner consistency," but he cannot release himself of the influence of his mother whose ethics "is based on *style*, which never has to give a consistent reason why it is the way it is" (143). Like the autobiographical mother, McCarthy's attraction to Catholicism was inconsistent, but it is no longer possible to dismiss its influence on her fiction, as some critics, such as Pearl Bell, have.² On the surface, McCarthy's reliance on Catholic allusions and metaphors to make her point can be found on the pages of nearly all of her novels and essays: Catholic allusions abound. Even in her nonfiction about her political and social life as an agnostic adult, Catholic metaphors are used almost exclusively. In "My Confession" McCarthy describes the seven days she spent with her fiancé (who soon became an ex-fiancé) and a Communist organizer in Southampton as having "a special, still quality, like the days of a novena you make in your childhood; a part of each of them was set aside for the Party's task" (89). Besides the subtle comparison of the Communist Party with the Church, the Catholic allusions and

²"But in McCarthy's brittle novels about urban intellectuals, there's scarcely a hint of religion of any persuasion, and the very title of her autobiographical Memories of a Catholic Girlhood indicated that her ties to the Church were among the 'childish things' she put away, not exactly in the spirit of St. Paul, when she grew up" (39).

metaphors are often associated with nostalgia for a lost world or childhood--a time when she was free of many adult responsibilities but also a time of great stress in Uncle Myers' household.

Yet McCarthy's Catholic allusions almost always have positive connotations. Miles Murphy from A Charmed Life is only one Catholic character in McCarthy's fiction, and, like Henry Mulcahy of The Groves of Academe, his Catholicism is tied up with his villainy. The Church is not only the source of Miles' villainy, but also his charisma and power. This power is also seen in the "good" characters like Polly from The Group who gets the most space devoted to her in that novel, and who is one of the only girls who lives the fairy tale existence of McCarthy's childhood. As the narrator notes, there is a "Catholic strain in Polly's ancestry" enough perhaps to make her, almost alone of all the other girls, happy with her life.

So the question is: Why does she rely in her fiction and essays on Catholic allusions and metaphors when she effectively left the Church at age fourteen? Why does she maintain that she is a liberal, or libertarian, when she seems to support a traditional and even conservative position on many issues? For some critics and contemporaries, these gaps and contradictions constitute a major flaw in her work. For others, the gap, which is reflected in the "latent Catholicism" in all her works, is in effect her desire to assimilate into the mainstream in conflict with her desire to be the perpetual outsider, outside the ordinary.³ Most of her allusions to Catholicism are positive; more than most critics see, a Catholic heritage greatly informs her writing and ethics, despite her apparent renunciation of Catholicism in Memories of a Catholic Girlhood.

³See Paul Giles, American Catholic Arts and Fictions: Culture, Ideology, Aesthetics (Cambridge 1992).

The Gap of Faith

In much of her fiction, McCarthy alternatively portrays the clash and conspiracy between the pragmatic, middle-class businessman and the idealistic, bohemian intellectual, replaying again and again the dualistic tensions of those two sets of grandparents, those two strains of Catholicism, that stem from her unforgettable, yet elusive, childhood, continuously attempting to find those gaps between belief and reason. The often dualistic moral sensibility is reflected in the typical McCarthy heroine whose inner fragmentation is often the source of their problems. This double consciousness, as defined by W.E.B. DuBois, occurs when one cultural perspective makes contact with another, creating double vision within the individual; McCarthy illustration of this is portrayed often by a fragmented heroine, or, as she did in The Group, each character represents a different "vision." The conflicting desire for social mobility and assimilation coupled with a particularly Irish-Catholic awareness of "amour propre," or hubris, is a conflict in McCarthy's first published novel. The Company She Keeps (1942), was originally a collection of short stories joined by a common heroine, Margaret, or Meg, Sargent. Each chapter details a different fragment of Meg's disintegrating personality: part bourgeois, part bohemian. One chapter that exposes the falsity of Meg's assumed selves is about a bachelor who gives parties, "The Genial Host." Meg is annoyed with this man and his parties but is unable to turn down his invitations because as a single woman, she needs him as much as he needs her. What he gets in return for occupying her evenings is a kind of devil's exchange: he wants her personal life, her reality. His parties are an interesting collection of what McCarthy critic Irwin Stock calls "allegorical possibilities...the chic intellectual positions to which they have sacrificed their own reality" (Stock in Howard 225). Meg plays the part of the Trotskyite Bohemian and finds herself fulfilling her role beautifully despite her mental resistance to the host's expectations. In the internal clash between pragmatism and idealism, pragmatism usually wins.

The “futility of political escape” is satirized in The Oasis (1949) (Chamberlain 354). Here again McCarthy dramatizes the disagreements between the two groups that were an integral part of her life in the Thirties and Forties.⁴ She pits the Purists, those who want to improve society through moral example, and the Realists, those who insist that behavior is historically determined, against each other. Both groups decide to test their philosophies in a utopian, non-urban setting. Katy, the McCarthy persona, tries to straddle the two groups. But it is Joe, the bourgeois capitalist, who is the real hero of the novel. The experiment fails when both groups agree to use Joe’s sporting gun (unbeknownst to him) to scare off some poor farmers who are poaching on their land. Morality and Marxism prove to be futile when reality disturbs their false worlds: both groups succumb to the selfishness and violence they had sought to escape. As political scientist A. Gottfried notes, “The incident reveals the fallacy of their common hope that by changing social environment, merely, they could change themselves...they had ‘counted on the virtues of others to rescue them from themselves’” (26). Joe Lockman, the Capitalist, is the hero of the story because he is a true realist who honestly faces the reality of human nature and does not hide behind an ideology. He alone does not see Utopia as a place for personal salvation but “simply an extension of opportunity.”

Lockman is not the only businessman who is used as a successful foil to the often hypocritical bohemian intellectual in McCarthy's fiction. In The Company She Keeps, Mr. Breen, the man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt, although not an exceptional man, attracts Meg with what she sees as his paternal nature; he also makes her doubt her choice of lifestyle. Unlike Meg Sargent, he is comfortable with his life and grabs on to her bourgeois roots, almost succeeding in getting her away from the "dirty" radicals. But the emblemed shirt, the business career tainted with money, the anti-intellectualism, and the final bourgeois sentimental telegram he sends to her when her father dies ("YOUHAVELOST

⁴ Her description must have touched some sensitive buttons: her ex-lover, Philip Rahv, threatened to sue her for his characterization.

THE BEST FRIEND YOU WILL EVER HAVE") add up and force her to turn back to her bohemian, single life, and run from the life her father and Mr. Breen represent.

In the chapter titled "Rogue's Gallery," Mr. Sheer, the art dealer, is, like Meg, frightened of being settled and comfortable, and prefers to live on the edge of bankruptcy. Margaret's attraction to this strange, dishonest man is at first baffling. Yet it becomes clear that both characters distrust success, and see some sort of virtue in living by their wits. Mr. Sheer is unable to handle success when he does get it; Margaret notes that

It was plain, at last, that Mr. Sheer had not imposed on the business world and used it for his own delight, but that the business world had used Mr. Sheer, rejecting the useless or the outmoded parts of him. He had not, as he first thought, outwitted anybody, but he had somehow, imperceptibly, been outwitted himself. (Company 76)

The now successful man tries to fail on purpose, sleeping with his boss's wife, but ironically, this is just what is expected from the successful business man. Margaret understands Sheer's discomfort with success; for the intellectual or the bohemian, success in the bourgeois world is suspect. But although Margaret tries to straddle both worlds, in reality, she still has the middle class ideology that was instilled in her as a child. She eventually marries Frederick, an architect, "the perfect compromise candidate, something halfway between a businessman and an artist" (284). The marriage is obviously a disaster, with Margaret wavering between respect and disgust for her husband.⁵

Despite her protests, Meg is closer to Mr. Sheer than to any other character in the novel. And like Mr. Sheer, she suspects the traditional definition of success as superficial or "too easy" and prefers a more difficult, dangerous route. Mr. Sheer himself submits to risky operations as penance, perhaps, for his success. And although

⁵ Meg's fateful choice of Frederick is so pivotal to McCarthy's philosophy that she depicts it again in the short story "The Weeds" which she admitted was based on her relationship with Edmund Wilson.

her employment with him is brief, their relationship lasts throughout the novel, providing the continuity for Meg's antipathy toward anything she perceives as "bourgeois"--false, hypocritical, even immoral. She prefers to be with men who are "handicapped for American life and therefore humble in love" (112)--writers, intellectuals, leftists--outsiders like herself, but unlike herself "humble in love" thus giving her an arena for control because she, unlike them, knows that they and herself are both special and defective: idealistically they could be reformed, but pessimistically they would then be "middle-class" and conformists. Mr. Breen's good qualities are rejected because he is financially successful and writes in Hallmark platitudes. She continues to go to Plaumann's parties *because* she is asked to act her role as a non-conformist. And she's attracted to Mr. Sheer for he alone in the novel is her soulmate.

McCarthy learned early that the middle-class, Babbitt figure was bland, uninteresting; the Sacred Heart nuns romantically empathized with "the great atheists and sinners" like Marlowe and Byron. "In Rousseau, an unbuttoned, middle-class figure, they had no interest whatever" (Memories 93). At Sacred Heart, McCarthy was first elated to be compared to Byron and later crushed after her Protestant, and less idealistic grandfather Preston forced the nun to retract her pronouncement. Even as a child she dismissed those middle-class, squabbling Greco-Roman gods in favor of the Norse gods with their satisfying sense of evil that was lacking in the bickering Roman gods. As an adult, she revisioned Macbeth into a hen-pecked husband, "a murderous Babbitt, let us say" (3). She berates the poor man for caring too much for other's opinions of him, longing for social approval:

Macbeth, in short, shows life in the cave. Without religion, animism rules the outer world, and without faith, the human soul is beset by hobgoblins...It is a troubling thought that blood stained Macbeth, of all Shakespeare's characters, should seem the most "modern," the only one

you could transpose into contemporary battle dress or a sport shirt and slacks. (14)

For an agnostic, McCarthy is quite aware of the inner discomfort a lack of faith can lead to; what disturbs her about the middle-class is that their faith is misplaced. It is not spiritual and external, but materialistic and internal; it's not a moral struggle but simply a struggle for power, things and self. In "On Madame Bovary" McCarthy describes Emma as "a very ordinary middle-class woman, with banal expectations of life and an urge to dominate her surroundings" (85). Emma is pitiful not tragic like the similarly placed Anna Karenina because "what happens to [Anna], up to the very end, is always surprising for real persons and moral strivings are at work, which have the power of 'making it new'" (86)--middle-class tragedies are otherwise dull, ordinary.

Yet it is not merely the lack of moral perspective that disturbs her, but the dullness of middle-classness; the "middle-class tragedy" of both *Bovary* and her own childhood offended her "artistic decorum" (Company She Kept 163). McCarthy, like Peter Levi's mother, seems to be aware that her strict moral positions often give way to aesthetics. *The Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt* gets both her derision and her sympathy; despite his pragmatic career, he has a flare for authority. Meg Sargent begins to enjoy Breen's company and to admit her respect for his financial success and obviously strong self-esteem. Narcissistically revealing her disdain for equality and relativity, she respects his good taste in choosing *her* because unlike the artists and intellectuals she usually dated, this man is an American success. At the same time, she recognizes that he is more honest about himself than is she in her relatively recent adoption of a bohemian façade. Having seen through her, she is able to reveal herself to him, and looks up to him as a father/priest figure.

Meg finds middle-class life repellent aesthetically, yet attractive and secure; it reminds her of her early childhood. What Meg finds repellent, however, is not just a

perceived middle-class hypocrisy, but any type of conformity, especially by idealists on the left.. In the appropriately titled essay “My Confession” in On the Contrary, she writes: “this same distrust of uniformity made me shrink, in 1932, from the sloppily dressed Socialist girls at college who paraded for Norman Thomas and tirelessly argued over ‘Cokes’... .” (78). Even the popular slang word “Cokes” disturbed her.

Since she hold herself to a higher moral standard than anyone else, McCarthy’s satire of the bourgeois businessman is tempered, and she takes sharper aim at intellectuals and artists, like herself, who ought to know better, “the very minority who believed themselves most immune” to the “illness of the modern world,” according to Louis Auchincloss (Pioneers 175).

What bothers McCarthy most about intellectuals is their inability to act--a paralysis--that does not inflict the bourgeois businessman (who acts selfishly, but at least acts). This is most apparent in A Charmed Life (1954). Miles Murphy, the devilish Irishman, the byronic hero that McCarthy and her persona Martha Sinnot cannot help but admire is Martha Sinnot’s ex-husband. Seven years after their divorce, Martha returns to the Cape Cod town of New Leeds to live with her second husband, John Sinnot, despite all common sense. Miles is older, more intelligent, more powerful than John, who quickly becomes a minor character in the eventual rematch between Miles and Martha. New Leeds is comprised of both townies and artists, and it is somehow “charmed” in that everyone who lives there is eventually sucked into either paralysis (by laziness or alcohol), or domestic horrors. Miles compares Hamlet to the Bohemians in New Leeds: both are unable to act. Again echoing McCarthy’s dualistic sensibility, in this semi-fictional world there are two camps: those who produce and those who are paralyzed since they lack the necessary discipline and artistic sense to be true artists. This is a dualism found throughout McCarthy’s work, highlighting her ultimate moral struggle between good and evil intentions and acts.

But the absolutes of good and evil are not respected in New Leeds, a relativist society which prefers to dodge the question of their existence, in a desire to enjoy the benefits of equivocation. Echoing the young McCarthy's equivocation when she is expected to lie to the nuns or risk being expelled right before graduation, Jane Coe chooses to lie about exactly when she receives the news of her mother-in-law's death because it would ruin her dinner party plans. Her motivation, she believes, is good and thus excuses the lie. In a distorted sense of the Sacrament of Confession she thinks: "Fear left her; some day she would confess to Warren and that would take care of remorse" (169). Her husband, Warren Coe, although more kind and sensitive than his wife, is no better. He wraps his art in modern scientific themes--according to Miles, "Science and philosophy had deranged his common sense" (58)--so that he can delude himself into thinking that "his painting might be just as true as Rembrandt..." (59-60). But even Miles admits that Warren's faith in relativity allows him to be one of the producers in this community. At New Leeds, faith in anything is better than no faith at all; this is the true target of McCarthy's satire. Martha recognizes in horror that unlike the Church, in human life "no sign had a fixed meaning" (23). Like Meg Sargent, Martha is fragmented, often referring to "the other person" inside herself that makes her do the most incautious things, like move to New Leeds, and flirt with her ex-husband. Toward the end of the novel, Martha realizes that unlike herself, the truth for most people is relative, and the act of doubting becomes an end unto itself. It is Martha's true doubt that gets her into trouble in this "charmed" world. Martha admits to the Vicomte that she has no faith in her work. " 'Ah, well,' he said, 'you will never succeed then. In this world, everything is relative' (99), foreshadowing her death at the end of the novel.

Martha's flaw is that she refuses to recognize that despite her artistic and moral standards, she is living in a relative universe where all values and standards are equal, and thus so is she: she chose New Leeds, despite the presence of her ex-husband, because she thought she was different, but in one brief moment of revelation, realizes she is in the

wrong place. The artists and bohemians of New Leeds, in their desire to be different, have all become the same. Reaffirming her attraction to her childhood bourgeois world, an attraction she has denied, she thinks:

This horrible bohemian life you see here, with lily cups and
beards and plastics--it's real leveling, worse than suburbia, where
there's a frank competition with your neighbors, to have the
newest car or bake the best cakes. I can understand that. I'm like
that myself. But here nobody competes...as if I were the only
one left in the world with the desire to excel... (119)

Because she is unable to keep this moment of self-awareness, Martha is killed; the rest of New Leeds survives since it is either their lack of awareness or their fatalistic acceptance that is perfectly natural in their world. On her way to get the abortion (which she funds with the aid of Warren Coe, who must lie to get it), Martha begins to sing, ironically, songs based on Latin hymns, and for the first time feels in control of that other person inside herself. But she is killed when a drunk driver, Eleanor Considine, who is formally introduced into the narrative only moments before as a "local poetess" coming to dine at the Coes', rams into her car. Eleanor is described as the opposite of Martha, yet like Martha, she sounds suspiciously like McCarthy herself:

a woman of fifty, with dyed red hair and a long amatory history. . . .
a cautionary example of everything Martha was trying not to be. She
had run away from a conventional husband, out west in Cincinnati,
and married a young man, who had died of tetanus, all alone, in
Mexico, from a cut she had neglected...She had a rough, ringing
laugh and an artless, witty candor; she confessed her misdemeanors

to everyone, on first acquaintance; her truthfulness excused her,
it was commonly felt. And she was always scribbling something... .

(310-11)

The man McCarthy was engaged to after her divorce from her first husband also mysteriously died in Mexico, after being rejected by McCarthy. Echoing Fitzgerald's Dick Diver, who is exiled for his pride, Martha Sinnot dies for her folly, the sin of hubris: Martha is killed by McCarthy herself, who was perhaps all along that self-aware, inner person Martha was trying to deny, while Diver is destroyed by the Catholic Nicole. An inability to recognize their other selves, the selves they do not especially like, is what eventually destroys them.

What Martha Sinnot lacks that Meg Sargent has is self-awareness, the ability to live in chaos, and, perhaps, a therapist. McCarthy herself had a nervous breakdown while married to Edmund Wilson, and spent nearly eight years in psychotherapy. She saw the therapist as a modern day priest--but without the mystery and spirituality, the therapist turns out to be yet another Babbitt figure. How could he possibly help her? Meg's pragmatically named Dr. James is simply too ordinary, and knowable; clearly he wants to lead her back to her middle-class roots where everything is relative, and any thing inexplicable can be boiled down to some identifiable cause:

First comes the anesthetic, the sweet optimistic laughing gas of science (you are not bad, you are merely unhappy, the bathtub murderer is "sick," the Dead End Kid is a problem child, poor Hitler is a paranoiac, and that dirty fornication in a hotel room, why that, dear Miss Sargent, is a "relationship"). (276)

Therapy for Meg is a nightmare. How dare Dr. James, whose name echoes William James, but whose philosophy is an odd mixture of Pragmatism and Freudian psychology, for whom all is knowable, take the mystery of the world and destroy it with scientific logic? In Dr. James' world, there are no Byrons. And worst of all, Dr. James wants to "cut out the festering conscious" which would turn her into the selfish, amoral Emma, rather than the noble, tragic Anna. In addition, Dr. James denies the possibility of true evil, or true good. A human being has the ability to adjust to future situations without trying to understand motives: " 'Accept yourself as you are,' he said. 'Stop trying to dig into your motives. You have set yourself a moral standard that nobody could live up to'" (275). But how can a moral person live without some standard to live by? Dr. James, like the bourgeois she both dislikes and is attracted to, lacks the tragic sense of life, the "mask of Cain" a romantic so admires, yet offers her a way out of her turmoil, to a safer, secure place. Dr. James is chosen by Frederick who could not cope with Meg's "spiritual trouble" so he "had done what the modern liberal man inevitably does--called in an expert" (279). Meg is torn between the security that Frederick and his emissary Dr. James represent, and the disorder of living the romantic life, the same conflict she went through with the Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt.

After he raises then dismisses the Freudian doubt of whether we control our destinies or our characters, Dr. James leaps to the more optimistic, pragmatic conclusion that Meg is courageously reliving her childhood, this time with Frederick rather than her Aunt Clara, in order to do it better this time. But this is not Meg's definition of moral courage, like the hypothetical test of whether she would save someone in a fire. She recognizes that whether she views her life through Freud or James, the results are still the same. She fights the evidence of Freud's pessimistic view of life as a Catholic and as an intelligent woman.⁶ She too fears that "the universe is mechanical, utterly predictable,

⁶ Camille Paglia, whose Catholicism is consciously integrated into her oft-debated ideas, believes that Freudian Pessimism is akin to the spiritual life she knew in her Catholic girlhood. But both the Church and psychotherapy continue to purge away all pessimism, the Church in its assimilation with Protestantism, and therapy in its contemporary leaning toward self-actualization. Thus violence and gore--

frozen, and this in its own way is quite as terrible as the notion that the universe is chaotic. It essential to our happiness to have both the pattern and the loose ends" (262).
Ultimately Meg can't help but see Dr. James as being a magician with his "therapeutic lie" (302).

Behind him you could see Mesmer and then Cagliostro, the whole train of illusionists, divine, disreputable, charlatans, who breathed on the lead coin, and, lo, it is purest gold. In spite of herself, she felt a little excited...She was ready for the mystery.
(288)

But she can't give in to the false mystery for long, and she does not believe in God; therapy simply takes away her hope in human possibility. She can't accept Dr. James' view that she is courageous, she cannot put her faith in a higher spiritual being; she cannot accept the Freudian denial of free will. Thus, she lives in limbo, both wanting order and fearing it:

Ah, she thought, thank God for the mind, the chart, the compass. Of course, the universe had to be meaningful. There can be no question without answer; if you throw a ball it must come down. Her life was not mere gibberish; rather it was like one of those sealed mystery stories where the reader is on his honor not to go beyond a certain phase until he has guessed the identity of the murderer. She had come to that imperative blank page again and again in looking for the obvious, unobtrusive clue... ." (258)

realism--on television and the movies have become the new religious perspective, replacing Freud's determinism as well as the iconography of the Catholic Church: blood-soaked crosses, St. Lucy's eyeballs on a plate. Like McCarthy, Paglia's complaint is that psychotherapy and the Church are painting a false, idealistic picture of reality.

Unlike Martha, Meg lives, and although it is with an empty, unheard plea to keep her conscience, her inner turmoil, and to “preserve me in disunity,” it is a promise to herself that she will continue to suffer what she believes is the moral and romantic path rather than succumb to the evil of an easy solution. The gap is dangerous, chaotic, perhaps lonely, but it is only there that she can live with herself.

This need to place order on the messiness of life is a sign of self-delusion in McCarthy's works, perhaps stemming from her Aunt Margaret's maniacal desire for order in the face of raising four orphans: “A nature not unkindly was warped by bureaucratic zeal... Like all systems, my aunt's was, of course, imperfect” (*Memories* 70-1). Her inability to accept any attempt to order reality by a single abstract social or political order leads, in her fiction, to a restricted life and sometimes death. Adhering to a single, abstract ideology can only order one small part of one's existence, denying the other inexplicable parts of life---ultimately, deceiving oneself, a sin in McCarthy's philosophy.⁷ The Sinnotts need to continue the cocktail hour in order to create order in their messy lives--an avoidance of action, a paralysis even, that is not solely connected to inebriation. “Each feared that if the other let go for an instant, the construct of their lives would crumble like stale cake frosting” (15); Martha is more concerned about the delayed cocktail hour than John's bleeding wound. Martha “wanted a center for their life, something, as she said ardently, to live for. Martha was a purposeful young woman; she sought a meaning for everything” (5). She is unable to accept that some things may have no meaning.

However, the acceptance of chaos, relativity and inconsistency is not an option either: the unexamined faith is destructive. Miles, an intelligent man of many talents, dabbles in psychotherapy to play with other people's minds. His desire to control others

⁷ See Robert Brinkmeyer's dissertation “A Crossing of Ways: Five Catholic Writers of the Modern South” (UNC Chapel Hill, 1980) for his enlightening discussion of Katherine Anne Porter (a convert to Catholicism) and her mistrust of those who attempt to order their lives by following a single action or ideology.

is consciously evil, and only Martha, the absolutist, recognizes this in him, the others are unable to recognize the dark side of humanity. But Martha does not recognize her own inner self, and that is what ultimately creates the series of events that lead to her death.

The women from The Group (1963) are also doomed by their need to place order on their lives at the expense of a more true part of themselves. The Group can be viewed as the final summation of McCarthy's problem with "the whole modern movement of ideas" --the real villain of the novel (Chamberlain 354). It is a novel about, in her own much quoted words, "technology and the mirage of political and social progress which misled the young in the 1930s," and it illustrates, as do all her novels, the dangers of uncritical faith (Conversations 166).

In the novel, technological progress is mocked in the recipes made with canned foods which Kay admires, with Dottie's flying diaphragm, in the description of Kay and Norine's red and black decorating style; Kay dies at the end while admiring the new fighter plans flying overhead. Ironically, these technological advances require more work than their mothers had to do, and results in less pleasure. Faith in technological progress becomes another blinding ideology. Brand names are scattered throughout the novel to convey the moral views of the individual girls or the group itself. For example, Kay avoids too often the difficult route by relying on canned foods, gentrified tenements, and mass-market goods from Macys. And Dottie's trip to the Margaret Sanger clinic for the new scientific discovery is more vividly depicted than her actual orgasm when she recalls chapters from the supreme scientific sexologists.

Technology is also a symbol of the villainy of the artists in A Charmed Life. The Sinnots feel morally superior to others because they will never drink instant coffee. Jane Coe spends her time and money on labor saving schemes that add more, not less, labor. The "artists" whose desire is to be as unconventional as possible, depend on canned food and deep freezers "as much as the worst Babbitt" (Auchinclass 178). For their

counterparts in The Oasis the dependence on technology, the gun, is the ruin of their utopia, foreshadowed by the necessity of the carpet sweeper, the sewing machine and the flush toilet. Even the head terrorist in Cannibals and Missionaries (1979), McCarthy's last novel, "put too much faith in technology ...why didn't he use a plain old-fashioned gun?" asks the McCarthy persona (355).

McCarthy herself disdained technological improvements such as the electric typewriter or the food processor. Infuriating feminists once again, in a 1978 interview she said that "technology had a good deal to do with the origins of some of the passions around women's lib. That is, technology had deprived women of a sense of uselessness, or making a contribution" (166). This is an admirable theme: progress as merely another blinding ideology used to escape the reality that progress takes real work and effort.⁸

Three of the characters of The Group, Dottie, Helena and Priss, are presented as more conservative than their mothers, and by contrast less happier than their mothers who for the most part seem much more romantic and open-minded than their Vassar-educated daughters. Biographer Doris Grumbach noted that McCarthy "distrusts all orthodoxies and authorities while maintaining the most severe orthodoxy of them all, a stern, conservative sense of personal freedom in every area of contemporary life" (218). Feminism, which claims that women have been victimized by patriarchy and thus have not had the freedom to develop their true selves, would not fit her personal philosophy, her moral idealism. But it may be that patriarchy, at least the men she chose to associate with, restricted her to a liberal position that was clearly uncomfortable for her. Unlike the men from the working-class Bronx and Brooklyn at Partisan Review, McCarthy, as described by her friend Elizabeth Hardwick, was not a despairing or alienated person (6); unlike them, she rested her ideals on the authority of the individual based on an nostalgia for the past, not an idealistic vision of the future.

⁸ When asked during an interview, McCarthy said that she left acting for writing only reluctantly because writing was easier.

She lived as she preached, in the gap, the chaotic limbo of a romantic conservatism that defies definition; yet her distrust of any ideology is a blinding ideology in itself, and prevented her from recognizing the potential of feminism, for example. In her surprisingly scathing 1986 review of Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale, McCarthy does not believe that the novel works as a dystopia for several reasons. One is that the portrait of conservatism and liberalism gone berserk is too farfetched, and that the "fear of a backlash in politics, ought not to deter anybody from adhering to principles; that would be only another form of cowardliness." Unsurprisingly and insightfully, she sees Commander Fred as simply a bourgeois husband who despite his supposed power just has to have an affair with the handmaiden, and just has to be caught by his wife. Although I believe that McCarthy's overall review of the novel is unfair because she applies her own standards (*she* never used a credit card, and does not understand why anyone else would, so how could she pity the woman whose credit card was taken away; in fact, in the novel *bank* cards, not credit cards, are closed for women), it is in keeping with her philosophy that if it does not suit her sense of reality then it cannot be the truth.⁹ On the other hand, she was able to see the bigger picture. The description of Mr. Wendell, the owner of The Liberal in The Company She Keeps, perfectly sums up McCarthy's philosophy:

[He was against the] new spirit of bureaucracy, this specter that was haunting the world under the name of progressivism or communism. He believed in socialism, but he held out for an economy of abundance, for a free judiciary, and trial by jury. He stood for inviolable human rights rather than plans or programs... .(179)

⁹ McCarthy does agree with the attack on extreme feminism as seen in Offred's mother's burning of pornographic material, even though she refuses to see that there can also be excesses of both conservatism as well as liberalism (see The Groves of Academe).

McCarthy was hostile to feminism partly because it was not part of a larger, more universal struggle; at the same time, perhaps she put her faith in *individual* achievement rather than group loyalty. Besides, McCarthy's love of gardens, cooking and marriage kept her from accepting a philosophy that wanted women to be more like men--or so she perceived the feminist movement. At the end of The Group, Kay is described as becoming "very war conscious, like many single women" (379), perhaps reflecting McCarthy's belief that any substitution for religion, and in this case also marriage, is bound to be a failure.

In "My Confession" McCarthy sees the origins of her "doubt of orthodoxy and independence of mass opinion" as a result of turning anti-Communist in 1936. But there is no doubt that her mistrust of ideology, or her seemingly elitist need to buck any intellectual, social or political trend, is firmly embedded in her Catholic education girlhood, and the forever unbridgeable gap between belief and reason.

Good and Evil: McCarthy's Dualistic Philosophy

Many critics have pointed out McCarthy's need to confess. In Intellectual Memoirs (1992) published after her death, she reveals the real name of the Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt as if she has been dying to all along (George Black, a perfect Babbitt name, it must have been difficult for her to repress it). But many practicing Catholics would agree that McCarthy's revelations are not equivalent to the sacrament of confession. McCarthy's autobiographies would in fact be placed not with the confessional and conversion narrative mode of St. Augustine, but rather the more existential and psychological confessional modern literature. To Catholics, a confession implies a confessor, usually a priest, who has God's ear and license to grant God's pardon, not a multitude of anonymous readers. Although St. Augustine is also confessing to readers, he writes to affect, convert or create a response in them, unlike McCarthy, who is perhaps writing for a more personal reason only. There is also a

reciprocal act required of those confessing: true repentance from the confessant and forgiveness or acceptance from the confessor. As Cheryl E. Pidgeon points out in her unpublished dissertation on St. Augustine's influence on Flannery O'Connor: "Just as the individual is not a being into himself [but part of a larger, Christian community], so the act of confession is not an end in itself. It is an act that anticipates a responding act. Only in this way is identity defined and assured" (58).

As an agnostic, McCarthy is unable to receive the forgiveness a true confession would give her, yet she is able to use her autobiographies to publicly define (and defend) her identity and her life. One might also see McCarthy's need to confess (like Meg Sargent's prayer to a God she doesn't believe in) as a desperate act of one who cannot help but believe in the Jansenist existence of good and evil. Confession is by encouraged by Catholicism as a way toward heightened self-consciousness of the individual's capacity for sin: the distinction for McCarthy is that she must be content with simply the "awareness" without the consolations of forgiveness and pardon. The Irish-Catholic Denis Donoghue agrees that although God's pardon is nice, "to whom do I confess my humiliations, my self-disgust, my hatred of my body? And who will dispose of the matter of conveying pardon? Whose forgiveness would make a difference?" (96). For the autobiographer, (McCarthy wrote three autobiographies, numerous personal essays, and autobiographical fiction), the reader replaces the confessor/priest.

Martha Sinnot of A Charmed Life dies at the end of the novel because she is unable to detect and destroy her potential sins like a good Catholic girl before confession, and as a result, misapplies a Catholic morality to her situations. She unconsciously stumbles into sex with her ex-husband Miles (who by traditional Catholicism is still her real husband), and when she finds herself pregnant, she has an illegal, immoral (in the eyes of the Church) and unnecessary (in the eyes of the Bohemian community) abortion rather than have the child and confront her sin.

Although some critics, such as Paul Schleuter, fail to recognize *any* moral background in McCarthy's fiction (he finds her novels morally "sterile") other critics support my belief that, despite herself and her often "immoral" affairs (though she often blamed her sexual activities on some force outside her control), McCarthy's morality is loyal to the Jansenism of her Catholic girlhood, and to many critics, this is her downfall. Bruce Cook, writing for the conservative journal Catholic World, suggests with almost McCarthyesque malicious glee: "By some cruel trick of the psyche, she has been frozen in the haughty moral posture of her Catholic girlhood" (34). Her biographer Carol Brightman believes that McCarthy clung to a dualistic view for most of her life with the possible exception of her 1945 introduction to Simone Weil who taught her to suspend her tendency to see life, particularly politics, in terms of good versus evil. McCarthy, however, recognized that "goodness" as a moral concept connected to religion is an idea that one unfortunately grows out of, and she indirectly responds to those who denounce her dualistic world view:

The idea that religion is supposed to teach you good, an idea that children have, seems to linger on...in their letters. Very few people appear to believe this anymore, it is utterly out of style among fashionable neo-Protestants, and the average Catholic perceives no connection between religion and morality, unless it is a question of someone *else's* morality, that is, of the supposed pernicious influences of books, film, ideas, or someone else's conduct. (Memories 23)

One can read her fiction and essays as evidence of her dualism; each novel depicts a character in a situation that requires her to choose between good and evil, self-honesty and self-deception, in situations that are often sexual and more comic than tragic (Meg and Mr. Breen, Martha and Miles). What is constantly required of the moral McCarthy character

is unending self-examination. In The Company She Keeps, Meg is chastised by both Dr. James and her husband to stop digging into her motives, to loosen her high moral standards. At one point she dwells on her ability to relate to others and thinks, "This was her best side, and she knew it. But did that spoil it, keep it from being good?" (98). Throughout the novel, Meg tries to be the intellectual-bohemian, yet continuously retreats to her Jansenist duality, and her attempts to be what she is not are thwarted. Her eventual self-awareness, in McCarthy's moral landscape, means she is a moral character, and thus she is allowed to live.

Other heroines, who are unable to recognize good and the "evil" of self-deception, are less lucky. In A Charmed Life, the reader learns on page thirteen that John and Martha are doomed: "Motives did not matter, John and Martha had agreed... you should never be deterred from a good action by the suspicion that your motive was bad." At times, however, Martha admits to, as Auchincloss writes, "the egoism that lurks behind her every act" (184), a self-awareness that she denies when appropriate, as she does when she turns her adultery with Miles into a seduction, leading to her fateful drive down the wrong side of the road. Because she is unable to "fight" Miles, she deflects any moral responsibility for the act, and is, in McCarthy's moral world, punished for her self-deception. The unsteady belief in an individual's free will is seen in the alternatively sympathetic and damning portrayal of Martha's inability to take responsibility for her fling with Miles: the sympathy lies in McCarthy's dryly humorous detailing of the clumsy, drunken seduction, while the damnation is delayed to the end with her death. Martha's avoidance of personal responsibility is, however, more damning than her adultery in McCarthy's moral universe.

McCarthy herself was not immune to the perils of human nature versus intention. In her nonfiction essay "Artists in Uniform," she realizes that her defense of Jews to the anti-Semitic Colonel was merely her condescension toward both Jews and anti-Semites. "If I had been a good person, I should unquestionably have got up and left" (66). Yet

not only doesn't she leave, she agrees to have lunch with the prejudiced, uncouth Colonel because she was simply unable to refuse: he *expected* her assent, and it would have been rude of her to refuse him, an excuse McCarthy and her heroines use often in their relations with men, in particular.

If being good is so difficult to achieve because of a lack of self-awareness, or an inability to accept personal responsibility, how about being evil? It follows that McCarthy's definition of evil is a result of passivity in the face of a moral choice: Martha allows Miles to seduce her, Kay marries Harald knowing she doesn't love him, McCarthy lunches with the boorish anti-Semite--yet though all three fail to be good, perhaps, they are not quite evil. Evil in McCarthy's moral scheme is conscious, a conscious acceptance of evil *per se*. When she writes of her Grandfather Preston she quickly avoids his lack of action to attack Uncle Myers' consciously evil actions. Grandfather Preston rescued Mary and her brothers only when he was concerned about her glasses, "the rest of what we poured out to him he either did not believe, or feared to think of, lest he have to deal with the problem of evil" (Memories 79). It seems to be Preston's inability to confront evil, rather than his late recognition of it, that McCarthy regrets. She herself was fascinated by evil, expected it, was disappointed when it was missing, as in Greek mythology. As a young girl, she preferred the Norse myths because she "liked the strong light-and-dark contrasts...I was a firm believer in absolutes...the appeal of Freya, Balder, Loki, and company was, precisely, to my Catholic nature. The Prince of Darkness, despite his large handicap, was a power for us, a kind of God..." (How I Grew 6-7). She also recognized in Balder the story of Jesus with the promise of a second coming. This she attributes to her Catholic upbringing, though Jansenist upbringing would be more precise, with its strong sense of and attraction to evil, and perhaps this is why critics like Schleuter find her work morally sterile. Norman Podhoretz recognizes McCarthy's strong sense of evil. Writing of the minor characters in A Charmed Life,

Warren Coe, a little abstract painter of small mind, silly aesthetic theories, and large heart; and the timid sexual ventures of Dolly Lamb, a fading virgin in her thirties whose goodness is equaled only by her fragility. These sections of the novel are thin and rather flabby. They are Miss McCarthy's experiments in charity, and they seem to register her perception of the helplessness of good people... The fact is that good people, helpless or otherwise, are not in Mary McCarthy's line... ." ("Gibbsville" 271)

The Man in the Brooks Brother shirt is a kind, lonely man who is pummeled into a cliché ridden boob. But characters like Miles Murphy, and Henry Mulcahy stand out because they are purely evil, and honest in their evilness, though deceptive to others. As McCarthy asserts in her literary analysis of Macbeth,

Pure evil is a kind of transcendence that he does not aspire to. He only wants to be king and sleep the sleep of the just, undisturbed. He could never have been a good man, even if he had not met the witches, hence we cannot see him as a devil incarnate, for the devil is a fallen angel. Macbeth does not fall; if anything, he somewhat improves as the result of his career in crime" (9).

The reader grudgingly respects Henry and Miles the more we are exposed to their consciously evil machinations. In both novels, the self-deluded artists and intellectuals are portrayed as more evil in their blinding faith or blinding inertia than the villainy of Henry and Miles.

For the most part, however, McCarthy's heroines are neither evil, nor good, but somewhere in between, perpetually reliving the first great moral dilemma of McCarthy's

life--taking a glass of water before her First Communion: "I went through a ferocious struggle with my conscience, and all the while, I think, I knew the devil was going to prevail: I was going to take Communion, and only God and I would know the real facts" (Memories 20). Many a Catholic child has confronted this dilemma, but McCarthy was unable then, and later, to deceive others without fear of being caught. But by whom? Despite her professed atheism, she believed that each of us is morally responsible to someone inside us, not far from a definition of God ("Unless there is in each of us a *someone else* watching--that used to be called our conscience. I believe that there is: I *know* that other person" (How I Grew 104)) and in 1987 she said to Brightman, "If one is alone in a room one must behave as if one is not alone in a room... ." (275). This is in keeping with her dualism and her traditional Catholicism: both good and bad are within us, and, in Meg Sargent's voice, "we believe that original sin is given to all and grace is offered with it" (285). All of her heroines must struggle with the choice between sin and grace, and without the benefit of faith and within a secular context, their sins become merely farcical "pratfalls," as Meg recognizes, ultimately outside one's control, fated as all humans are to lean toward self-deception, to misplace our faith.

The influence of her dualistic Catholic heritage is obvious in every word she writes, not only in the moral conflicts she presents. Her sense of evil is accompanied by her love of mystery. This contradiction within herself--a fear of the gap between belief and reason, yet the desire for faith--is what makes McCarthy and her writings so interesting. Throughout her fiction and nonfiction, allusions, rooted in her heritage, to the mystery of faith, the beauty of language, the need for authority, abound. In The Company She Keeps, Meg is compelled to convert Mr. Breen to the religion of self-awareness: "This man, too, must be admitted into the mystery; this stranger must be made to open and disclose himself like a Japanese water flower. With a messianic earnestness she began to ask him questions... ." (89). He presents his self to her on the train first as a middle-class businessman, yet slowly reveals himself to be a man who has control over himself,

who knows what he wants, whose inner person, or god, has the authority Meg craves. She sees this in the way he orders food, drink and her bath, the way he expects her to submit to her similar background. Lulled and mesmerized by his authority, Meg sets out to give him what she *perceives* is the mystery of self-awareness that he lacks, without realizing that if she succeeds, he will no longer be the strong, confident man she admires.

It is when her characters fight the mystery, and attempt to dissect the unknowable to make it known that they get into trouble. This so goes against the criticism of McCarthy herself as one who “murders to dissect” that it seems incongruous. But when we remember that Meg, who prays to at least keep her “awareness” even if she can’t control her actions, lives, and that Martha, who because she aborts her child because she is unable to live without knowing who the father is, dies, perhaps this incongruity makes sense. When the Doctor sees Martha’s fear of not knowing the baby’s father, he responds, unlike many a doctor would, particularly one in McCarthy’s schemata, “ ‘What do any of us know when it comes down to it? Even in medicine. It’s all a mystery. Why are we here? What does it all mean?’ ” (267).

In her criticism of *Macbeth* McCarthy writes,

Macbeth does not trust to fate, that is, to the unknown, the mystery of things; he trusts only to a known quantity--himself--to put the prophecy into action. In short he has no faith, which requires imagination. He is literal-minded; that, in a word, is his tragedy.” (4)

This is not to say that Macbeth does not believe in the witches or in superstitions, because he does. But it is his belief in superstitions that “is the companion to his lack of faith.” When one does not have faith in the unknown, or at least the reasonable unknown, then one is too easily seduced by the opposite of reason, or the easy answer. Silly Priss in The Group would have “lost faith” in her husband’s breast feeding regime if not for the

unfortunate proof that it the child was growing, albeit slowly. It is her need for proof, any proof, of her sadistic husband's sanity that allows her to keep her faith in both him and his regime.

So is McCarthy contradicting herself or not? She believes that one should have faith in mystery, but not if to have faith goes against reason. Yet faith can only be given by God, so what is one to do if there just is no faith? Miguel de Unamuno wrote that "to doubt is to have faith" or else the faith is mindless, not real. It is in this sense that we can firmly place McCarthy into the canon of Catholic writers.

She could not escape her Catholic heritage. In the first chapter of Memories of a Catholic Girlhood she sadly recognizes that as a child the beauty and mystery of the Church provided actual emotional shelter, rather than simply spiritual shelter, from an abusive household. Beauty became for her equivalent to truth, the communion of rituals and safety, as opposed to the ugliness, lies, the punishing rituals and threats of her guardians.

[R]eligion saved me. Our ugly church and parochial school provided me with my only aesthetic outlet, in the words of the Mass and the litanies of the old Latin hymns, in the Easter lilies around the altar, rosaries, ornamented prayer books, votive lamps, holy cards stamped in gold and decorated with flower wreaths and a saint's picture. This side of Catholicism, much of it cheapened and debased by mass production, was for me, nevertheless, the equivalent of Gothic cathedrals and illuminated manuscripts and mystery plays. I threw myself into it with ardor...(18)

European Catholicism's free will and Irish-Catholic Jansenistic dualism, the Catholic McCarthys and the Protestant/Jewish Prestons, faith and reason--McCarthy's life

and resulting moral philosophy can be seen as a personal experience, as well as part of the larger Irish-American experience. McCarthy herself noted the dichotomy; she saw the McCarthys as the “wild streak” in her heredity and the Prestons as the “rule of law.” She found beauty in Catholicism and truth in Protestantism. But of course these generalizations are easily disturbed, for as McCarthy noted, her Puritan, Yankee grandfather was the one who died “overdrawn at the bank” not her “wild” Catholic relatives. Paul Giles is one of the few critics who has examined McCarthy’s Jansenism as a result of the contact between her Protestant/Catholic upbringings:

The “Protestant” side of McCarthy, emphasizing existential freedom, must always confront those aspects of her “Catholic” heritage that have become lodged in the unconscious interstices of her texts and work to compromise individual independence by engendering patterns of psychological and cultural fatalism. (450)

Paul Giles raises an interesting point: one reason why McCarthy’s Catholicism is often dismissed as mere surface allusions is because McCarthy herself, although she recognized its influence, denied her Catholicism, just as she described her Grandmother Preston as a “Jew who denies the Jewishness in which she is trapped.”

Many readers believe that the fiction she has written is spoiled because of McCarthy's agenda to reveal the inconsistencies in all ideologies. Yet McCarthy's fiction is also famous for its self-analysis and revelation touched by confession, and perhaps this is what saves her fiction from didacticism. She is her own biggest critic. Through her fiction, she criticizes the moral decisions she has made in her life, and her passivity in the face of evil. She once wrote that we must continue to relive all the painful moments in our life so that we can gain control over them, and that is what she does in all her writing. Interestingly, autobiography is another way to make order of the inconsistencies and chaos

of life, an act that is dangerous for her heroines, but nevertheless, a human frailty. There is a "confessional impulse" that McCarthy sees as stemming from her Catholic training (Conversations 81). It is when the critical and the confessional meet that we have a Mary McCarthy novel.

McCarthy herself came full circle in terms of Catholicism during her life: in a 1963 interview she said: "I don't believe in God. My belief is nobody believes in God anymore except peasants and simple people, the others just pretend to" (Grumbach 17); in 1979 she says that "ethics came to me in the frame of Christian teaching, and even though I don't believe in an after life I'm still concerned with the salvation of my soul. I'm quite incapable of switching to an atheist's ethics, if there is such a thing" (qtd. Gross 35); but in 1980 (nine years before her death) she accepted an invitation to speak at St. Michael's, a small Catholic college: "I looked at the list of writers [Margaret Drabble, Margaret Atwood] and decided to come" (Conversations 187).

Chapter Five

The Sacred and the Secular in Mary Gordon's Fiction

Introduction

With missionary zeal, Mary McCarthy desperately desired to reveal the gap that must be filled with faith, not reason, in all beliefs or ideologies, perhaps as a result of her own tragic loss of faith as a young girl. It was an ambiguous desire, because ultimately, if we read her fiction with this in mind, we see that she regrets her loss of faith. Mary Gordon's fiction apparently follows McCarthy's; she, too, illustrates in her fiction her distrust of secular replacements for religion. Yet even more than McCarthy, Gordon has been deliberately rejected particularly by critics who are just beginning to delineate the Irish-American literary tradition. Like Gordon's uncle, who "can't stand her books," they seem to be disturbed by the sexuality in her works, however puritanically rendered, and by the feminist awareness that influences her heroines.

Despite her antipathy to organized feminism, McCarthy began a trend (in 1963) with The Group and her depiction, however satirical, of the sexual, political and social awakening of young women. Mary Gordon's feminist awareness allows her to be more sympathetic toward her heroines, and less zealous in attacking secular ideologies. For Gordon, the tragedy is in the loss of the mystery and spirituality in the secular world, and not the gap between belief and reason. But like McCarthy, Gordon distrusts all views that deny the gap, whether the gap must be filled with faith, mystery, or sexuality. Isabel is saved from self-immolation at the end of Final Payments not just by her women friends, but also by the words of the Easter Mass, and her neighborhood priest who calls her weight gain a "slow death." Neither feminism or Catholicism alone can save Isabel.

Yet Gordon sees her vocation as a writer as having "devotion and the discipline, and it had to have the same kind of purity as a religious vocation" (Schreiber 27). The

idea that writing can be nearly a religious experience is at the heart of her work: her talent is for writing about the mystery inherent in human relations.

The Irish-Catholic Imagination

Gordon has written extensively on the influence of Catholic rituals and beliefs on her writing. Andrew Greeley concurs: "The religious images of Catholicism are acquired early in life and are tenacious. You may break with the institution, you may reject the propositions, but you can't escape the images" ("Why do Catholics Stay" 40). Images work subconsciously, informing a child's aesthetic and moral imagination. Catholicism, unlike many other religions, particularly traditional Protestantism, is theatrical, a religion where objects can be transformed by words, where images relate entire stories, where metaphors confirm and explain our existence. Protestantism is much more stoic and pragmatic, where faith is expressed silently, inwardly through prayer and meditation rather than images and rituals. Every aspect of an individual's life is celebrated in Catholicism in the Seven Sacraments. As a result of its origins in paganism, Catholicism also celebrates the seasonal high points of each year. Catholicism's pagan origins and historical appeal to the masses led to the use of images and rituals to replace and explain the written word and theological doctrine. As the child matures, or the preliterate become literate, these images take on a more intellectual symbolism. The images retain their emotional impact, even if they lose faith in the absolute meaning of the symbol, for most Catholics.

When Catholic writers, particularly ex-Catholic or ambiguous-Catholic writers like Mary Gordon, use such images, the question is whether they use them to represent the deeper issues being raised in the fiction, or use them, as more than one critic has accused, "decoratively, for ticky-tack symbolism" (Wolcott 21). Mary McCarthy once said that she used Catholic metaphors as a sort of secret code to other Catholics, but I suspect that because her sense of language, beauty, and her moral perspective were steeped in her Catholic heritage, those Catholic metaphors and images are simply the most powerful ones

that came to her mind. A moral writer like McCarthy and Gordon needs to refer to an iconography of religion; if there are no icons, they must be invented, for humans need images to express certain abstractions, to help us understand what is not within our grasp intellectually, scientifically or spiritually. It is no surprise that Catholic writers use Catholic images, and the individual critic or reader needs to decide whether those images are powerful to the non-Catholic reader who comprise much of the audience. Wolcott exaggerates and helps no one with comments like the following:

Just as director Martin Scorsese sticks a bleeding Jesus into nearly every domestic scene in "Raging Bull," Gordon turns the slightest gesture or phrase into an opportunity to conjure up flaming crosses, the shroud of Turin, "the hot flesh of martyrs." (21)

Wolcott is referring to Gordon's first two novels, Final Payments and The Company of Women, both about young Catholic women encountering the seemingly dangerous and hostile non-Catholic world for the first time. How could it be odd if their metaphors were based on anything but their Catholic upbringing. The Catholic images and symbols are mostly positive, reflecting a religious concept that God's grace is reflected in all objects, in contrast to, as Greeley points out in another context, a conflicting and "severe prepositional teaching of the leaders of the Church ("Why do Catholics Stay" 40). Flannery O'Connor once defended her own Christian symbolism: "A good novelist . . . finds a symbol and a way of lodging it which tells the intelligent reader whether this feeling is adequate or inadequate, whether it is moral or immoral, whether it is good or evil" (Mystery 156).

Mary McCarthy insisted that a Catholic education was very helpful in learning languages (through Latin), and history because even though it was biased, it was impassioned. Mary Gordon wrote that the Catholic belief in the Devil, in Hell, is helpful

for the artist because it is a reminder that everything one does **matters** (Good Boys 164). In The Company of Women Felicitas feels cheated because her education stressed passion, either belief or disbelief, rather than objectivity; but to Gordon this is not such a bad thing.

Somewhere there's a conversation I like between Mary McCarthy and Flannery O'Connor in which Mary McCarthy tries to get Flannery O'Connor to admit that she really believes that transubstantiation is only a symbolic act. And Flannery O'Connor is reported to have said, "If I thought it were just a symbol I'd say the hell with it."

(Good Boys 164)

The rituals of the Mass provide a sense of continuity, of history; when symbols are familiar and have meaning from one generation to the next, the symbols are not empty, but quite powerful.

Each Sunday and sometimes daily the young Mary Gordon, reared in a traditionally Orthodox, pre-Vatican II church, experienced the drama of Mass. The setting was charged with Jesus on the Cross, candles burning by the robes of the priest, the sun lighting up the images of the stained glass window, reminding all of the story each pane represents. The climax of the Mass is the transubstantiation, when the priest alone is able to cause the bread and wine to change into the body and blood of Christ. Gordon explains that the Daily Mass taught her rhetoric, and that the "erotically charged yet unreachable figure of the priest" taught her characterization (Good Boys 163). The members of the Parish provided her with a limited terrain--the perfect size for a future novelist--of characters. The marginal and un- or underemployed, attended the daily mass and the future writer often speculated on who these people were. "A novelist builds a fence enclosing a certain area of the world and then calls it his or her subject. To be Catholic, particularly in Protestant America, made one an expert at building the limiting, excluding

fence" (Good Boys 164). In her short story "Temporary Shelter," Maria and Joseph go to Daily Mass where they "made up lives for all the people, and they talked about them when they no longer went to Daily Mass... ." (5).

Gordon believes that the stories of Catholicism had great influence over her as an aspiring novelist. When she first encountered the story of Christ it was told to her orally: an oral story like a fairy tale or ghost story we hear as children sticks in our memory. Perhaps because she did not read the Bible or the edited children's version of it as I did, she understood Jesus as a complex character, and not the passive victim he is portrayed as in children's Bibles. Jesus is both paternal and maternal with children, and has concern not only for their souls, but for their daily, mundane, physical lives. Yet, in the next scene, he tells his disciples to mutilate themselves to save the children. The juxtaposition of caring and violence, and the passion for his ideals is attractive to an intelligent child who may become the sensitive writer.

Priest, novelist and sociologist Andrew Greeley's main argument in most of his non-fiction (he also claims that this is the value of his fiction) is that storytelling is both the precursor and vehicle for propositional teaching. Storytelling conveys information, beliefs and hopes, eventually triggering the beliefs and hopes of the listener who "possessed the same symbolic repertory" and created a "storytelling community" (Catholic Myth 39). He confirms Gordon's experiences that Catholicism's power is based on its symbols and stories, which appeal to the human need for explanation, meaning and community. Narrative, for both the novelist and the writer of the Gospels, is a way of establishing truth, either the truth of Jesus Christ, or the truth of an idea. The major difference between the novelist and the writer of the Gospels is that the Gospels are essentially "authorless" since they come from God, and derive authority based on the belief in Christianity, while the novel has a human author whose point of view is usually not derived from a "central Christian mythos."³ The Church is often suspicious of fiction, in many

³ See Anita Gandolfo's Testing the Faith: The New Catholic Fiction in America. New York: Greenwood Press, 1992, for further discussion of the relationship between Catholicism and the concept of imagination.

cases misreading works because they express criticism of a church that cannot accept any dissent. But perhaps the distrust of fiction, particularly modern fiction, stems from a conservative and Catholic idea that as there exists central, fixed, truths--such as redemption and judgment--then language, words such as these, must represent their fixed meanings. Thus a deconstructionist view of words as having shifting meanings is, as John F. Desmond recognizes, "antithetical to a Catholic vision" (7).

In his engaging analysis of Final Payments, John Neary points out that Isabel recognizes the conflict between the images and stories of her Catholic heritage and the restrictive doctrine espoused by her father. Neary is one of the few critics who sees a hopeful ending to the novel where Isabel realizes that she can "articulate a religious vision . . . [through] narrative rather than a doctrinal discourse" (110). In other words, Gordon uses in her novels the same technique she learned in her Catholic girlhood to find spiritual meaning in our existence--storytelling--for asking religious and moral questions. This is apparent in many of Gordon's novels, but particularly in her first-person narratives. In Gordon's latest work, The Rest of Life, a collection of three stories about three different women, each narrator confesses to us her fears of loss as they are related to sexual love. In the process, we learn much of how they think about themselves, how they wish to be perceived, whether or not they are guilty of some wrong, whether or not they can continue living in such a state of not knowing. Each character tells us her own story for the same reasons: to find meaning in life, to find answers, perhaps, and to gain some sympathetic listeners who are familiar with the symbolism.

In many ways, Gordon is torn between the definitive language of the pre-Vatican Church where words had unambiguous meaning and power, where the words "hoc est enim corpus meum" (spoken by a priest) transform the bread/the Host into the body and blood of Christ. Gordon misses the old language, "words that mark a way of life that has

Also of interest here is her attack on Andrew Greeley's fiction which he describes as contemporary theological narratives, but which she sees as sexist, full of masochistic women who must suffer physical pain for God's grace or just plain old happiness. (This is not too different, however, from stories of the saints.)

a word for every mood, a category for each situation: 'gifts of the Holy Ghost,' 'corporal works of mercy,' capital sins,' 'cardinal virtues'" (Good Boys 176). While a belief in the power of words is obviously an asset to a writer (Gordon said the language of the Church "bred in [her] a love of strongly rhythmic prose" (Good Boys 161)), language does not have the stability of meaning outside the community in which the meaning is given. The non-Catholic, temporal world is not as structured and perhaps secure, as it is full of what Paul Giles called "epistemological uncertainty" (164). Of course this doesn't prevent Isabel or any of Gordon's heroines from bringing "her care for clarity and beauty into the physical, temporal world" (Neary 106). The quest for many of her heroines, however, is to be able to adjust to a world where the certainty of meaning is not available, where perhaps words can express only near truths through storytelling and metaphors. In "Living at Home," the second novella of The Rest of Life, the narrator says several times that language fails her as it does her autistic patients who do not trust words--believing too much in their power. What can happen to those who believe that words reflect an absolute truth is that they, like the autistic children, can lose their own significance and power in the world.

If rosaries, candles, holy water, Latin and rituals closed the gap between the human and the divine, they also instilled in their believers a deep sense and love of mystery and the unknowable that cannot be bridged by images or words. The Catholic Church in the United States was formed by several different strains in an appeal to a variety of immigrant cultures, and to assimilate into the dominant Protestant culture. Four of these strains can be identified in Mary Gordon's writings: the Immigrant Church, the Repressive Church of the 1950s, the Church of "miracle, mystery, and authority," as Gordon called it ("More Catholic" 69) and the post-Vatican II Church. The one she loved for its language, music art and mystery, the one her father converted to for its intellectual theological discourse, the one that most contributed to her image of woman, is the church of "miracle, mystery, and authority." It is the church that attracted writers such as

Flannery O'Connor and Denis Donoghue, who both wrote of their respect for mystery as a result of Catholicism. O'Connor has written extensively on the connection between mystery and art, and her essays are collected in Mystery and Manners. Although she was highly suspicious of the idea of the "Catholic novel" because she feared that the term was often used pejoratively, she did attempt to define it:

If I had to say what a "Catholic novel" is, I could only say that it is one that represents reality adequately as we see it manifested in this world of things and human relationships. Only in and by these sense experiences does the fiction writer approach a contemplative knowledge of the mystery they embody. (Mystery 172)

For Donoghue, mystery in the Christian sense is "an outward sign of inward grace . . . [or] a truth offered only by divine revelation" (Arts 24). Both O'Connor and Donoghue fear that the modern need to explain everything, to take the mystery out of life and art, is ultimately self-destructive, all that comprises human life cannot be defined, explained, answered. The Catholic novel can be defined as an affirmation of the mystery and sacredness of human life.

In his introduction to a collection of contemporary short fiction by Catholic writers, John Berlin notes the most prevalent conflict that runs through all the stories: "That tension between celebrating the 'open-ended mystery of matter' and confronting the limitations of human weakness and sinfulness" (xiv). In Gordon's fiction she makes clear that the need for mystery in our lives despite the modern desire to eliminate it, and often her heroines take a destructive path in their desperation to fulfill this need: they attempt to live a contemporary spiritual life according to doctrine of the orthodox Catholic church, a doctrine which is no longer effective in a secular world, nor does it exist in the contemporary Catholic church. In Final Payments, Isabel's memory of her spiritually dogmatic father is

deflated by Hugh's "science," and rather than relieve her of her father's hold on her, as perhaps was Hugh's intention, it creates a larger distance between her and her lover:

So that was it. My father wouldn't take me to the mountains, to the ocean, but it had nothing to do with Catholicism or revealed truth. It had to do with his own father. There was nothing mysterious about it; it followed some kind of law to which human beings, weak and predictable as they were, seemed to be susceptible. Where I had seen a compelling mix of tradition and original thought, Hugh had seen the slow damage of family relations. It made it so much simpler--and less interesting--this being able to understand things. (160)

Isabel's quest in the outside world was an attempt to escape the definitions of the Church, only to find the definitions of a pragmatic society to be equally confining. When her father has a stroke, presumably as a result of her affair with his student, she automatically assumes the role of one who is atoning for perceived sins and spends the next eleven years of her life caring for him, rarely leaving the house: "I was encased in meaning like a crystal" (12). Later in the novel, the Church again fails her, although this time it is the Vatican II church, when she returns to the security of the church personified by the deformed Christianity of Margaret, the housekeeper whom the young Isabel had kicked out of the house. Isabel goes to the local church for confession; there are new rites, no language, no mystery which Gordon visualizes as the darkness of the traditional, mysterious church, and the lightness of the modern church where everything is knowable. "I remembered the adjustment my eyes used to have to make, from the darkness of the confessional to the comparative light of the church. But now there was no adjustment necessary: both lights were the same" (226). Isabel's fear, before she is saved by her friend the alcoholic priest, is that no longer is there a place where people, words and things

have meaning, that there is no universal order or authority beneath or above the surface of life. What she learns from the priest is that she is simply looking in the wrong place; that she has to create her own order and values rather than rely on those of a modernized church, and that she can look directly at Christ's words, unfiltered by the church, where His lesson is that life itself is full of mystery, paradox and irony.

Despite the somewhat hopeful ending to her first novel, ten years later Gordon herself went searching for that old order in a visit to the Lefebvrists, a Catholic sect led by Marcel Lefebvre that denounces Vatican II, and attempts to live according to the dogma of the orthodox Catholic Church, including traditional Latin Masses. She was looking for:

miracle, mystery and authority; I was interested in style, in spirituality, in a movement that combined the classical ideal of the Gregorian Mass and the romantic image of the Foreign life, suggesting illegitimacy. I had imagined a group of thoughtful, saddened communicants led by priests devoted to a vision of sanctity made fecund by the grandeur of the past... (Good Boys 197)

Of course she is disappointed, finding the Lefebvrists to be as absolutist as the old church, as conservative politically as any fundamentalist, as romantic as mass-produced statues of Mary. At about the time of this trip, she wrote Men and Angels in which organized religion (in this case Protestantism) does not meet the human need for mystery and human love. And in The Rest of Life, the secular woman narrator of "Immaculate Man" realizes that it is not necessary to understand everything, that the unknowable, the paradox of life is a given. She says, "I've learned to give up the twin ideas of cure and blame. I've learned that most blame is useless, but that we love it because without we're left with something worse: not knowing why" (95).

In her essay on Flannery O'Connor, Gordon recognizes that although O'Connor was interested in a character's redemption, not his damnation, because the redemption is unearned and mysteriously given at God's will, that this is a tragic sense of the world (Good Boys 38). Gordon's own view of the world is also tragic, because to believe that life is ultimately one of paradox and mystery (as many non-Catholic creative people do, also)⁴ and "[i]f the 'mystery of matter' is indeed open-ended, then failure, entropy, and even despair have their own claims on the Catholic imagination" (Berlin xvi). When asked why Felicitas is doomed to remember and live Father Cyprian's words ("we were not put on this earth to be happy") in The Company of Women, Gordon responded:

But, you know, I'm very cynical about just having a very good life.

I mean, those of us who are out there in the greater world doing everything--we're so exhausted. We're so sort of overburdened.

There is no place of rest. I mean, I wouldn't **not** do it, but every now and then the cloister and a limited life have a real appeal. (Keyishian 75)

Without an underlying sense of order or authority, the heroines are constantly, randomly, running around and there is no place in which to anchor. All of Gordon's heroines take themselves and their lives seriously because, harkening back to Flannery O'Connor, things, words, people, life **matters**. Unfortunately, one result of searching for the motive in every action, the meaning in every word, is a paralysis for some, like Isabel's friend Eleanor, or a self-deception: Isabel's other friend, Liz, says that life is a matter of tricking oneself to make it bearable. Her husband, John, is successful because he can **act**; he's not paralyzed by the inability to choose, nor is he self-deceptive like Eleanor. As

⁴ John Breslin, S.J. in his introduction to The Substance of Things Hoped For: Short Fiction by Modern Catholic Authors (Doubleday, 1987), notes that although non-Catholics can, of course, also have the "conviction of the open-ended mystery of matter," the difference is that Catholics incorporate that belief in a "discipline of life with rituals and restraints." Like many Catholic critics, he includes ex-Catholics who have once participated in this discipline.

Liz says of her husband John, "he has no solidity," and like the lightness of the confessional, no mystery, meaning, depth or significance, unlike Isabel's father who had authority and "signified all over the place" (69-70). Like John, the college kids he introduces to Isabel are not imbued with the tragic sense; they look up at Isabel "as if they had never been disappointed in life, or considered the possibilities of pride, or pettiness, or evil" (113). Only those who have the look of suffering, akin to a romantic sense of having lived and felt pain, are acceptable to Gordon and her heroines. This is similar to Mary McCarthy's desire for the Byronic hero. In both their works, an idealization of the romantic sufferer is directly related to their Catholic upbringings.

The Secular and Sacred: Mary Gordon's Dualism

With the Second Vatican Council, in an about face from the First Council in 1870 which bolstered the authority of the church hierarchy, the Roman Catholic Church attempted to modernize, at least superficially, in order to regain some of the Catholics they were losing to the age of relativism. Unfortunately, what most critics agree happened was that by changing the "superficial" elements of the faith--the language (Mass was no longer to be said in Latin), the rituals (the Sacraments were renamed; meat was permitted on Fridays) and the art (the Gregorian choir was replaced by the folk guitar)-- the vehicles by which the faithful recognized Catholicism as distinct from other Christian religions were changed. And suddenly the institution that was supposed to be a stable authority in a chaotic world gave in to that world. Rebellious Catholic teenagers no longer had the orthodox church to rebel from and then return to. The Church became, in the words of Richard Rodriguez, "less ornamental...tampereed with, demythologized, deflated... Symbols have changed" (101).

In the 1960s, Mary Gordon, like Mary McCarthy before her and many teenagers who need to rebel and seek their own authority, left the Church when she was fourteen, precisely when it began to change. For Gordon, the Church that she left, the Church that

formed her as an artist and as a moral person, no longer existed: "When I looked back over my shoulder to see what they were doing in the open-windowed Church, the part of me that was learning about great art could only run away" (Good Boys 174). Anita Gandolfo, who includes Gordon in her study of post-Vatican II fiction, notes that the Church's change was so sudden that Catholics felt abandoned by that "nurturing mother." It is, thus, not surprising to discover the dominance of images of the death of a parent in post-conciliar fiction of Catholic experience" (16).⁵ In Final Payments, the death of Isabel's father's echoes this change in the church. Instead of providing an escape or a road map to the modern world, the church has joined it—and as many Catholic writers have noted, it is almost irrelevant that the Church did keep its sexual prohibitions.

A church that relied on symbol, language and image to convey strict dogma and theology to the masses becomes even more distant when it takes them away. What was lost was a sense of community, a culture by any definition of the word, with its own language, jokes, symbols, morals and traditions. For the most part, Catholics raised in the pre-Vatican II church gained their religious and moral sense through images and symbols, not through intellectual discourse and theology. For many Catholics, Vatican II led to the loss of a strong sense of identity.

Gandolfo notes that many post-conciliar Catholic writers write to cope with this loss of the "framework of meaning" they grew up with. We see this in the undercurrent of nostalgia, loss and regret in Alice McDermott's At Weddings and Wakes and Elizabeth Cullinan's House of Gold. Anna Quindlen's first novel, Object Lessons (1991), also juxtaposes the dying patriarch, Vatican II, and the coming of age of her heroine. These writers deal with this loss either by wishing the old traditions were back, throwing them out completely and embracing the new framework, or revising the old traditions to meet the

⁵ Novels by Irish-American Catholics after Vatican II that portray the death of a parent include Elizabeth Cullinan's House of Gold (1970), Mary Gordon's Final Payments (1978), James T. Farrell's The Death of Nora Ryan (1978), Mary Gordon's The Other Side (1991), Alice McDermott's At Weddings and Wakes, Anna Quindlen's Object Lessons (1991) and One True Thing (1994). One could also include Gordon's The Company of Women (1980) because Father Cyprian, who is Felicitas' father figure, is dying by the end of the novel.

needs and problems of contemporary society. Gordon revises the old traditions in her fiction; many of her heroines learn to cope with loss, falter and return to the cocoon of the old traditions, then slowly attempt to recapture their lives by revising the old tradition in a way that is not as confining. This is not accomplished without a painful, often debilitating, sense of loss. Gordon herself once said: "Life is pretty dire and sad on the whole. I'm obsessed with the idea that the world is a dangerous place and terrible things can happen--aging and illness and loss of love--you name it, you can lose it. That's a sense I've always had" ("Growing up Catholic" 74). Echoing Gordon, Isabel sums up what can be seen as the fatal flaw in her character, a flaw that she blames on her Irish-Catholic upbringing:

There was in me now the...first fear of loss, the first foreboding of what I valued was at once irreplaceable and impossible to guarantee. I closed my fingers tightly around his wrist. (FP 163)

I was happiest with Hugh when I did not believe him seriously mine. The idea of ownership has always frightened me; I have never been able to understand collectors. I have always preferred the idea of longing for a Matisse to the idea of owning a Matisse. I have always preferred a sense of deprivation to a fear of loss. (FP 195)

Isabel's fear of loss stems from the loss of the omnipotent Church in the lives of its members. The Church was always there. The Church was involved in every milestone of life. There were rules, rituals, and ceremonies for every stage of life from first communion to marriage to Last Rites. And the Church was able to keep its members by providing a sense of community and refuge so powerful that its loss was debilitating. Yet

this omnipotence was comforting in the way that a family is, in theory: no matter how harsh the outside world, it is there for comfort and security.

Isabel's quest is to find a new shelter, a new identity. Since the Church was intertwined with her father who had died, she seeks to recover it in men and sex, only to fear losing them, too. Because the loss of her father and her faith seems to have begun with having sex with her father's student, she sees sex, and now love with Hugh, as the precursor to loss, so she runs back to Margaret for "the safety of her inability to inspire love" (243). Although she sees the Catholic Church's values as getting her into this mess, Isabel's attachment to those values allows her not to dismiss them entirely. It is at a Good Friday Mass that she accepts that loss is part of life, that life and love are dangerous, but the alternative is Margaret:

That was what we were kneeling to acknowledge, all of us, on this dark afternoon. We were here to say that we knew about death, we knew about loss, that it would not surprise us. But of course it would surprise us; it had surprised even Christ in the garden. (246)

The story of Good Friday from the Gospel helps Isabel understand herself better than strict theological dogma would. Rather than seeing the novel as only an attack on traditional Catholic values, and anger at the loss of those values with Vatican II, we can see Final Payments as an acceptance of one of the goals of Vatican II, which was to allow the Gospels and its lessons to speak directly to people, rather than disseminating a list of rules that must be followed no matter what the situation. Vatican II, in other words, gave Catholics more moral responsibility, taking away a stable authority on the one hand, but allowing more personal choice on the other. Of course, because there are still a long list of "don'ts," the authority is still there for those who desire it.

Because of the strong sense of community, and the inherent dependence that is required, members--particular those who were raised in the Orthodox church--see the Church "an ideal of perfection that dominates the lives of believers and apostates alike" (DuPlessix Gray 1). One can be sure of the Church, which is ordered and neat and beautiful, unlike reality. Isabel and her friend from childhood, Eleanor, are paralyzed by the resulting emptiness and nostalgia for those who leave the comfort of the community:

Eleanor: "I'd like to do something I was entirely sure of."

Isabel: "Like we used to be about the Church. It's so unfair.

There's nothing like it, nothing takes its place." (FP 53)

The security of the community of the Church, however, is juxtaposed with the fear of excommunication--of losing that community. Isabel realizes that she fears this--having to just be herself and not be able to hide within the paternal bosom of the Church. In Catholic school she learned:

Remember who you are and what you represent. I no longer knew whom or what I represented, and I became absorbed in the word itself. What did it mean, to represent? It meant you were not yourself but something larger. Only you were not the thing itself: you were the parts of you that were like the thing you represented. It meant being connected to something so strongly that people could not think of you without thinking of the thing. What if you represented nothing but were only yourself? (FP 137)

Both Isabel and Felicitas (of The Company of Women) fear the isolation of being outside the circle. Isabel is upset when Liz's husband John comes home because they have become

a family, and she is a stranger to this particular circle. She later gets drunk (and ends up sleeping with John) because she does not want to appear uncool in front of the teenage volunteers at the community center: "Most stupid things are done for fear of having no one to talk to" (117). Felicitas gives up the "honor of the isolate, the danger of contamination, of dulling her fine edge" in order to become one of Robert's lovers and join the community of his women (94). But both women miss their own communities, and after failing miserably in the outside world, they return to the world they know, a community of women, but of Catholic-centered women.

Many critics have misread Gordon's fiction, seeing in it an abdication to the modern, free-spirited world and an attack on all things Catholic and traditional. But like many Catholic writers, including Mary McCarthy, Gordon is conservative as much as she is liberal. Carol Iannone, right-wing in many of her beliefs and opinions, wrote that Final Payments is about "how to overcome guilt, cut loose from life's losers, and buckle down to enjoying 'the cares of this world' as soon as possible" (63). But this is a misreading. Isabel will never be able to "enjoy 'the cares of this world' " so easily! The novel ends positively because she seeks the help of her friends, but it does not end conclusively. Iannone and those critics like Judith Thurman and John Mahon who believe that Gordon favors the modern world at great cost to the traditional values, are wrong. They refer to Isabel's trip to Bloomingdales, the sex Isabel and Felicitas have with several men, the hippies Felicitas hangs out with, as vulgar alternatives to the traditional Catholic lives the heroines were leading before. But these critics miss that Gordon mocks these symbols of modernity as inappropriate and inadequate replacements for the old symbols.

Modernity is difficult to define. Iannone, Thurman and Mahon use it to refer to liberalism, relativity, progress, and absence of faith. In Gordon's fiction modernity is the world outside the Church she grew up in, a world with freedom and pleasure as well as danger and loss. Modernity is a metaphor for the quest her characters make; for a Catholic, the quest must naturally involve an encounter with evil. Much of Gordon's

fiction is almost all about the tension between tradition and modernity, religion and secularism. In Men and Angels, Gordon's first novel that is not specifically about Catholicism, the thoroughly secular and modern heroine, Anne, is uncomfortable with those who are religious. Gordon admittedly stacks the deck by having two different representations of religious lives: Laura is an obsessive fundamentalist of sorts, who eventually kills herself to save Anne, and Jane is the more respectable, intelligent, Protestant, who is quietly religious. The novel ends with Anne's regret that her children will have a distorted sense of the religious because of Laura's suicide, and a regret that she herself is excluded from Jane's more comforting religion.

Several Gordon heroines, Isabel, Cam MacNamara (of The Other Side), and the narrators in The Rest of Life, despite their concern with personal problems that are thoroughly rooted in the secular, all work in fields where they attempt to help others: Isabel works with the elderly, Cam is a divorce attorney, the women in the three novellas work in a women's shelter, as a doctor, as a nurse. Their work is all in the secular, yet they are all caring, helping, relieving suffering, giving shelter--using the Catholic or Christian ideals they grew up with. They do not completely break with the caretaker roles that Catholicism idealizes for women.

In Final Payments, Isabel's friends understand why she gave up over a decade of her life to care for her father, and Isabel never regrets it, even when she is out in the world trying to make up for lost years. She admires, and looks for in others, her father's fierce and pure orthodox moral position. The blue-collar neighborhood, however, doesn't understand precisely what Professor Moore does, other than teach, so they "had to invent for [him] an authority to which they could defer ...[he is seen as] the person who established 'the role of the Catholic Church in the modern world,' who kept intact that interface between the sacred and the secular" (16). Isabel is only her father's daughter. Like him she thinks, "Did most people find the present insufficient?" (132). But she continues on her secular search for a new identity, no longer the good girl, no longer her

father's daughter, no longer Catholic. Although she does remain friends with Father Mulcahy, the alcoholic priest is unable to give her spiritual advice until the end of the novel, and she "wrongly believes she can proceed free of the encumbrances of tradition and faith" (Payant 133). Because of a self-delusion that she can escape her faith, she is sucked back into an extreme version of orthodox Catholic ideology, and a distorted repetition of her life with her father when she offers to live with and care for the hideous Margaret. These encounters with the spiritual--hearing and really listening to the Gospel, meeting with the newly recovered Father Mulcahy who reinterprets the scriptures for her ("Remember, thou shall not kill...He meant slow deaths, too")--allow her to continue on her search for a self in the secular world.

In her discussion of the poignant and humorous novel by Francine Prose about an Italian-American family, Household Saints (1981), Anita Gandolfo recognizes that the characters, particularly the Italian grandmother and the American-raised daughter-in-law Catherine, both rely on ritual as a means toward an end--for the grandmother, it is the superstitious warding off of bad luck; for Catherine the modern quest for happiness--for both, it harks back to Catholicism's rituals. She quotes from the novel:

Mrs. Santangelo, with her spitting three times and making the sign of the horns, was no more fervent and ritualistic than Catherine with her one-cup-per-load of Ivory Snow. It was obvious to her that the search for newer and stronger detergents was part of the same blessed science which had arranged Theresa's safe arrival into the world, equally obvious that America and its science had already served the Santangelos better than any old country saints. (qtd. in Gandolfo 181-2).

In The Company of Women, Felicitas has sex for the first time with Robert, the hippie Professor. The scene leading up to her experience is full of odd rituals that echo Catholic

rituals. When Robert says to his two female roommates, “ ‘I hope Felicitas will remember tonight as the most beautiful night of her life,’” Felicitas thinks of her first communion which the nuns said was the happiest day in her life. (“They had said nothing about the happiest night, however”(122)). They all sit in a circle together, Robert, Felicitas, and his two female roommates, ritually smoke a joint together, also another first for Felicitas, listening to the record player. Iris gives Felicitas a yellow chrysanthemum and says, “ ‘I hope it’s real beautiful for you.” When she and Robert finally go to his bedroom, Felicitas thinks, “Now she was becoming part of something. She received the inclusion [into his life] as a blessing. When he touched her hair, she felt gratitude. In touching her, he made her human...” (124). Yet after the communion of the joint, the symbol of the flower, the initiation and transubstantiation performed by the priest-Robert, she thinks “she did not feel transformed.” Despite her attempt to add ritual and thus a kind of sacred permission to have sex, she does not feel the transformation she expected; rituals don’t work in the secular world, even when secularized.

Earlier in the novel, Felicitas’ spiritual mentor Father Cyprian tries to warn her not to secularize the sacred, but he is a poor teacher, and his lesson is so difficult to take that he only succeeds in distancing Felicitas. He takes her to a poor, dirt farm to introduce Felicitas to the different smells and textures of manure on the farm:

“Pig shit, “ he said, “is slimy and green, and among connoisseurs, it is considered aromatic. This is because pigs eat garbage, like the mind of modern man... I will not have you poisoned by the sentimental claptrap that passes for religion in this age. Christ and the Virgin movie stars. The Passion just another cowboy episode. Heaven a garden, the that is life eternal, not the smell of grasses.” (42)

Although angry, she tries to forget this lesson, but cannot; instead, she internalizes Cyprian's lesson while still desperately trying to fit into the secular world.

When the socialist college students confront Felicitas because she is studying classical literature, she defends its beauty. They respond by pointing out that beauty is class-loaded: "I mean, you think that stuff's beautiful and the Puerto Ricans think those statues that bleed from the eyes are beautiful. What's the difference? I mean, how do you tell?" Felicitas does not respond but thinks to herself, "order, harmony and radiance..." (139). Her aesthetic, shaped by her Catholic background, cannot be easily dismantled by the politics of the age. But because of Cyp's relentlessly abstract and almost cruel orthodoxy, Felicitas loses touch with the spiritual life, and none of the other women she knows--her mother, Claire or Elizabeth--can give her a spiritual alternative, for they are too caught up in caring for Cyp: "[Cyp] trained me too well, trained me against the sentimental, the susceptibility of the heart...I will not look to God for comfort, or for succor, or for sweetness. God will have to meet me on the high ground of reason, and there He's a poor contender" (255). This is not, as one critic noted, blasphemous or selfishly blind, but Father Cyprian's to offer Felicitas a religious existence that could survive the contemporary world. Felicitas ends the novel seeking shelter in marriage, and a man she does not want, far from Columbia University. The novel's only sense of hope lies in her daughter Linda, who luckily inherited her mother's mind, and will probably go through a similar struggle unless, as Father Cyprian belatedly recognizes, the Church permits women to be priests, or at least recognizes the need to admit women and a human desire for feelings (as Cyp says to Felicitas, "You have too many feelings. But then, you're a modern, you believe in them") and love into the Church's teachings. Of course, Father Cyprian is himself outdated, for the Church as he knew it is gone. The hope is perhaps that both the Church and the world will change enough--without becoming too secular or modern--for Linda.

For Gordon, a totally secular existence is as dangerous as a totally orthodox one. In Men and Angels, Anne remarks that she and Michael got married in 1968, when it was “very unfashionable,” Despite this, however, in the novel Anne recognizes that for the college students she meets, marriage is still a concern, “though they weren’t allowed to say so now” (18). But when Anne’s marriage is tested (Michael goes to France for a year to do some work, while she reluctantly chooses to stay home to do her own work), she worries about the secular marriage she and Michael had chosen: “Their marriage had no historical or social and certainly no religious significance. If it broke up, it was only a private misfortune, and not a rare one” (156).

Like Isabel and Felicitas before her, Anne realizes that life as she knows it is beginning to unravel because it is not based on something stronger more powerful than the whims of fashion. Anne’s furniture expresses her relationship to this fear. Although the narrator of the novella prefers the modern furniture, light and airy, minimalist in opposition to her mother’s antiques, in expression of her need to leave places at a moment’s notice, Anne’s furniture, as admired by Laura, seems, “place herself in the world of heavy objects as if, without them, she might fly off into some unknown, identityless sky” (Seabury 45):

All the furniture was old and strong. The furniture would never fail here...Everything in Anne’s house was valuable. She polished things until they shone. The feel of cloth was never stiff, it did not smell of paste or oil. The colors did not shout...Her things were deep. They did not fly up, fly off... . (Men and Angels 116-17)

Although in the above scene Laura is comparing Anne’s furniture with her own mother’s, the furniture does echo Anne’s growing desire to give her life weight. “She thought of Caroline and even Jane and how different life was for them. The shape of things had

meaning; they expected things to last" (156). But Caroline is dead and Jane is growing old, finding comfort and peace in religion. Anne, however, is not only too "modern" to find comfort in religion, she does not have the traditions and rituals that Isabel had to fall back on. After almost having an affair with the traditional (and Irish-Catholic) Ed Corcoran, the electrician, who turns her down because they are both married, "[s]he longed for some ritual place where she could be cleansed" (197). Even when her heroine has no institution to rebel from, to yearn for, like Isabel and Felicitas, she still longs for what she never had, yet inexplicably misses.

In the novella "Immaculate Man," we have the latest incarnation of the limitations of the secular, and a nostalgia for the past. It is the story of the last survivor of the dying, orthodox Catholic Church, and the Protestant woman who wants him to keep one foot in the old world, one in the new. It is the perfect metaphor for Gordon's own ambiguous feelings toward the Church. The nameless narrator is a middle-aged divorcee who had given up the hope of ever being loved physically again; she unexpectedly meets a priest who chooses her to fall in love with. He, at age forty-three, is a virgin when they meet and eventually make love. Yet instead of simply delighting and indulging in the empowering, woman's fantasy, she worries that now that he has been introduced to sex he will leave her for someone younger. His repeated vows not to leave her are understood to be the fragile promises of a boy (she often describes him as boyish): ultimately, sex will corrupt him. The priest, Clement, having been cloistered for most of his adult life, is presented as the sole survivor of a pre-modern world, a world where the three Cardinal Virtues of faith (in God), hope (in the future) and charity (love of humankind) had meaning. The narrator, being a secular woman, has no faith in God, no hope in her future, and, reminiscent of previous Gordon women, no sense of charity--in the broadest sense of the word. As a woman of the secular world, she relishes his reaction to her body, the first nude woman, including Playboy pinups, he has ever seen; he is "untainted by the images and pretexts of a bad age."

The two lovers find in each other what is missing in each of their lives. For Clement, the narrator replaces the mystery that is fading with the slow death of the orthodox Church ("That whole world, gone now..."). Her body is a mystery to him. It provides the shelter of the "Motherhome" that is no longer a cloister, but soon to be a shelter for abused women. The narrator, who is not an abused woman, but a woman who has tried to keep herself safe from the potential abuses of men and the dangers of the world implied in that, is seeking shelter in Clement.

The relationship is, of course, doomed, and the narrator knows it. In the first paragraph she admits: "I don't expect too much." She seeks shelter in him, yet he continues to seek it in God. She, a Protestant of the secular, modern world, was taught not to believe in darkness, in mystery, because reason can always shed light. Clement loves the mystery and darkness, and he will continue to search for its replacement in the secular world, even after he inevitably loses interest in the middle-aged narrator. The attraction he holds for her is not merely sexual. He represents an older safer, world where perhaps she can rest from a constant vigilance for life's dangers. But she is a pragmatic woman, and she does not believe in his repeated protestations that he will never leave. She knows that he will continue to seek the world he has lost. During a trip together to Paris, he tells her two stories: one the Ascension of Jesus, the other from the guidebook--the story of an infamous Parisian whore. The narrator can only understand the latter: it is more concrete to her than Christ's journey to heaven. She thinks: "That is more the world I represent. You should leave me. Go back to the clean weightless world, where the men wait and pray and look up at the clouds and then are spoken to by angels." She has no faith in the intangible. When he talks about his mother's pride and anguish at relinquishing him at age fifteen to the cloister, she imagines that the mother may have felt, as she does, that he was becoming God incarnate. And he is god-like to her, "different from other men" and far from the "objects of degradation" of the modern world. But she has no faith

in God, and he is shocked by her blasphemy. She knows, although he doesn't, that he will leave.

Once when asked if there were any other value systems that influenced her as much as Catholicism has, Gordon responded negatively.

And the thing about the Church, which is why it's so resonant, is that it does seem there is an essential core that seems to last and to go on, to retain its language, to retain its ritual, to retain, what I like to think of as the central values that are immutable. Whereas anything that is modern in conception--because the modern sensibility demands change all the time--doesn't have the resonance that builds up over time. (Schreiber 26)

Although Gordon is no longer a strict Catholic, or even conventionally religious, many of her literary essays are about writers who take a strong moral stance. Wendy Martin has noted that Gordon "praises Edna O'Brien's 'pervasive ironic morality,' Flannery O'Connor's 'conscious' Catholicism and Mary McCarthy's willingness to draw a firm line" (9). Her own concern with the relationship between the sacred and the secular worlds, and questions about love and sacrifice in both worlds, make her as moral as O'Brien, as Catholic as O'Connor, though, perhaps, her line is not as firm as McCarthy's.

In The Company of Women, before her trip to the abortionist, Felicitas goes to a thrift shop with her roommate who encourages her to try on old clothes. Looking in the mirror, she thinks:

It was unfortunate the clothes were out of date, for it made them less sober, and these were serious clothes. They were moral clothes. They were the first clothes she had ever worn that expressed, she felt, her

inner nature. But now she could not wear them in the street without being comic, even perhaps ridiculous. (216)

Gordon's morals are as entrenched in her Jansenist Catholic upbringing as McCarthy's. But her "evil" characters are much less ambiguously so, for they are offered the opportunity to change, such as Father Cyprian who can accept the changing role of women in the church at the end of Company. Like McCarthy, Gordon's fiction often examines the concept of goodness. And like Meg Sargent, Gordon's heroines realize that a fallible human has a difficult path toward goodness. For both writers, the definition of good is not the passive state conditioned in the Good Catholic Girl, but a much more active moral stance that requires a decision. In Final Payments, Eleanor admits that she hates persuading people to do what she wants, and Isabel asks, " 'How do you get what you want?' 'I suppose I still think that if I'm very good things will come'" (53). And Isabel backs out of making a decision when she accepts her lover's wife's definition of herself that she is a "good person gone wrong" who can get back on track by leaving her husband alone. In Men and Angels, Anne Foster recognizes that people considered her good. "She knew, though, that that was wrong; she knew that goodness shouldn't be confused with safety" (10). All three protagonists are made to suffer because they have adopted a passive state of goodness, just as they have passively accepted others' definitions of themselves.

The concept of goodness as a passive state is not morally valid, according to Gordon's fiction and essays. In an essay on American fiction, Gordon distinguishes the American concept of goodness or innocence and the European sense of the word. In American fiction, innocence is a passive state that stoically hangs on despite evil circumstance, whereas in European and British fiction, innocence is seen as actively, consciously choosing not to do evil (Good Boys 4). Part of the development of Gordon's heroines requires a dismantling of the good girl image, and a reexamination of the true

definition of the term. Anne and Jane have a conversation about goodness that reflects this idea:

“How I hate the word ‘goodness.’ What an obstacle it is to the moral life,” said Jane.

“Do you find goodness and morality incompatible?” Anne asked.

“Of course not. But the term ‘goodness’ has been so perverted, so corrupted, it now covers only two or three virtues when there are hundreds.” (200)

In other words, the Jansenist Irish-Catholic dualistic moral code is too simplistic. Terms such as good and evil need to be more complex, because the world is too complex. The Baltimore Catechism’s questions and stock answers do not take into consideration that there is often more than one answer, that there is more to being “good” than self-sacrifice and passivity. Gordon recognizes the need to be morally relative, but without losing the old codes. Gordon echoes “The Storm” by Kate Chopin, another Catholic writer, where a married woman and an old flame have an hour’s passion, yet the story ends ironically with the sentence, “So the storm passed, and everyone was happy.” In Gordon’s short story “Safe” the narrator looks back on her two divorces, and wonders: “Broke all sorts of laws: the state’s, the church’s. Caused a good man pain. And yet it has turned out well. Everyone is happier than ever. I do not understand this. It makes a mockery of the moral life, which I am supposed to believe in” (Temporary Shelter 171).

In an essay on abortion (Gordon is pro-choice), she wrote “[t]he desire for security of imagination, for typological fixity, particularly in the area of ‘the good,’ is an understandable desire” (Good Boys 144), but not an acceptable one. In other words, in order to be moral, one must accept a little chaos in life, where the answers aren’t always clear. But the fear of chaos is quite human.

Gordon's characters desperately try to order the naturally chaotic world. In Men and Angels, Anne's old, heavy furniture is ruined by the overflowing water and blood from the bathtub where Laura kills herself. Anchoring herself to a physical structure does not protect Anne from the chaos of life. In The Other Side, Magdalene fears the world outside her room. According to Marcia Seabury, "[a] physical structure gives her life shape. She is immobilized within it; her relationships with her mother and daughter too have set, have hardened into paralysis" (50). Magdalene's sister, Theresa, finds her mother's house filthy, her parents' physical life disgusting, and she sits next to her comatose mother angrily talking to her about the past; yet her daughter Marilyn likes her grandparents' comfortable home, and she escapes her family, although not without some baggage, to California. Other heroines repeat the pattern: Isabel tries to hide out with Margaret; Felicitas retreats to the farm with Cyp and the company of women. This moral paralysis is not too different from the Catholic sin of despair. When Father Cyprian recognizes that he had lost the love in his heart, he thinks, "This is the paralysis the damned are cursed with, and in my paralysis, not yet complete, I struck out with the diseased limbs of my clear rage" (270).

Many of Gordon's heroines think longingly of a near-death, or passive state, where moral responsibility is irrelevant. Images of drowning, fog and invisibility are found throughout her fiction. In Final Payments, Isabel often feels as if she is drowning in feelings or in the disorder of life she can't control, which is why she cries upon finding the rotten broccoli in her father's refrigerator. In "Immaculate Man," where the nameless narrator who passively watches herself have an affair with a priest, images of drowning and fog play a significant role. When the narrator's daughter nearly drowns and she is unable to move to save her, she fears she didn't want to save her:

I didn't want to stop what I was doing: floating, calmly, being carried

out. I was very happy. It was as if my daughter were calling for my attention when I was in the middle of making love. It was a bit like... the calm you feel before you're taken over by arousal in the hands of a lover you rely upon to be the expert. Or when you give yourself up to an overpowering scent: the scent of freesias in a cold room heated by a fire. No need to worry, no need to question. Just a giving over, in one case to pleasure, in the other to death by drowning. Where is obligation in two states like these? Far from you, where you lie pillowed and quiescent in the milky peace of giving up. (RL 12-13)

Later when she and Father Clement drive together to the Motherhouse, the narrator foreshadows the sex they will have in a few days while she is laid up at the convent because of sudden case of the flu: "The fog came around the car like water. It was as though we were drowning in silver air" (15). She will not take responsibility for the sex they will have.

We are forewarned that this narrator will follow the wrong path at the start of the story when she says, "I saw everyone's position; I thought everyone was right" (10). Because of her relativism, she allows herself to drift into situations, rather than make moral decisions or distinctions. And here we have a great contradiction or tension in Gordon's moral position: The church's strict moral code is too restrictive for today's world, yet the moral relativity of today's world invites people to give in to every sudden urge without moral guidance. Mary McCarthy believed that this is why people choose artificial "paradises" or moral codes, abstracted from reality, but Gordon's heroines succumb to contemporary angst or inertia, often relying on the moral code from the pre-conciliar church, a code that no longer works.

The Catholic philosopher, Miguel de Unamuno, points out that Catholicism does not recognize the contemporary person's tension between a desire for mysticism and the

“rationalism which it fights against...” (77). And because of the dialectic nature of Catholic theology, where the Trinity was created to link both monotheism and polytheism, humanity and the divine, grace and free will, the Church loses many adult Catholics by

doing violence to the mental exigencies of adult reason. It demands from them that they shall believe all or nothing, that they shall accept the complete totality of dogma or that they shall forfeit all merit if the least part of it be rejected...[As a result the Church]feared the excesses of the imagination which was supplanting faith and creating gnostic extravagances. But it had to sign a kind of pact with gnosticism and another with rationalism; neither imagination nor reason allowed itself to be completely vanquished. And thus the body of Catholic dogma became a system of contradictions, more or less successfully harmonized. (Unamuno 77)

This harmony is achieved however, at the cost of overwhelming emphasis on abstract concepts and morality.

Brenda Becker, who is not a Gordon fan, recognizes that in Gordon’s first novels, the “Church is **not** portrayed in grisly stock footage, but in all its exasperating complexity-- at once unbending and forgiving, logical and crazy, regal (at least in memory) and tacky” (28). Her heroines, like Isabel Moore, discover that they are seduced by what Gordon has called “the romance of religion” because it tells you what to do, but that it is possible to create a new identity without necessarily leaving the church, but by bridging the gaps and contradictions with some of the moral relativity, and as I shall discuss in the next chapter, feminist ideals, of the secular world. Final Payments’ Father Mulcahy is part spiritual and part secular (over the smell of the priest is the “secular smell of his Old Spice” (55)), and although he deals with this contradiction by drinking too much, he is ultimately kinder

than any other representative of the Church in this novel, and his reinterpretation of the Scriptures gives Isabel the self-knowledge and strength she needs to return to her life. By the end of the novel, Mulcahy also can see more clearly and offer true guidance: that self-respect is a spiritual **and** secular good, neither one privileged over the other.

Catholicism, like other religions, provides an ordered, authoritative way of placing one's self in the world, providing a moral structure to follow in what is often perceived as a morally disordered world. In many ways, Gordon admits the need for such order. Father Cyprian and Father Clement, though quite different men, both belong to the Paracletists order that is dying, and both men need to adjust to the structure of their lives that "held itself up outside history" (RL 59). Gordon repeats this theme but in a less abstract way in the short story "Now I am Married" where Susan recognizes that although young people today have more freedom, they are not happier. Now that she is married, she does most of the housework, "[b]ut it's the form of it I love and the repetition... That's what these young people are all looking for, form, but it's a dirty word to them. I like not having a moment to myself, it's soothing, and my life is warm and sweet like porridge" (133). The recognition of the dangers of wanting order is one of Gordon's themes.

Some people see the artist (except the post-modernist artist, perhaps) as using her art in order to "tame" the flux of reality, reordering it so that it makes sense, so that she can gain some control of the uncontrollable emotions, ideas, and people in life. But Gordon also recognizes that words are not as precise as she had once believed; words can describe, compare, contrast only relations between people or things, not the actual things. As John Neary points out, "language works, but even when it is used with aesthetic elegance and precise care it is capable only of expressing relative truths, of telling stories" (108). Yelling these words at the pitiful Margaret, Isabel has an epiphany: "The poor you have always with you: but me you have not always." When she hears herself yell Jesus' words to Judas, from the parable of Jesus and Martha, she recognizes that religious values are not

definitive, that they can be found through listening to the stories themselves, and she is now empowered to interpret them herself. Of course here Gordon gets into trouble, decried for succumbing to moral relativity. Yet Gordon herself must sense this because Isabel does not leave the Catholic community completely; she returns to Liz and Eleanor, who with each other's help will find, may find faith in themselves.

Gordon does not see Final Payments as a religious novel: "For me the religious novel would be something which had a relationship to God at the center of it" (Cooper-Clark 270). And, perhaps, she is merely using the Church and its symbols as alternatives to the rejection of patriarchy in the typical feminist novel of self-discovery. One critic complains that Isabel is still a Catholic at the end of the novel "if only because she cannot define her religion precisely enough to repudiate it" (Rawley 687). But Isabel, and perhaps even Gordon, has the typical adult Catholic's knowledge of Catholic theology, which is somewhat simplistic. The Church issued rules and answers through the Baltimore Catechism, and, according to Gordon, thoroughly discouraged any reading of the Bible. In Gordon's novels, although Catholicism is not completely rejected, neither is a full return to the Catholic life a positive option for her heroines. In the battle between the sacred and the secular, neither wins, only a combination of the two can offer her heroines any hope of happiness.

Chapter Six

"Angels of Self-Sacrifice" : The Heroines of McCarthy and Gordon

As any woman reared in Irish-Catholicism can tell you, a Catholic girlhood shapes who you are and how you see the world; it is a "faith of received expectations" as Sister Madonna Kolbenschlag deftly puts it. Unlike "simple" adolescent rebellion and growth, a girlhood steeped in Catholicism can result in a constant, life-long struggle to create a new identity, creating a bridge between the authoritative, safe, dualistic community to one that is its opposite. There is a resulting tension between traditional cultural-religious values and modern values, and if one desires to assimilate with the a secular American culture, traditional values held too tightly can become distorted, eventually limiting growth.

As a reader of literature, and as a feminist, Rachel Brownstein has recognized that women read novels about women fictional heroines in order to learn about the possibilities and limitations of being a woman.¹ "The reader can see a heroine of a novel and be her, too, as she wishes she could simultaneously be and critically see herself" (xxiv). As the reader interacts with the heroine, claiming and rejecting actions and thoughts, so too can the writer, the creator of the heroine. In the creation of a heroine, especially one who so closely resembles the author herself, the writer is perhaps working out the moral, or sexual, or identity dilemmas that were incompletely worked out in their own lives. Yet Brownstein is referring to the nineteenth-century heroine, and as much as Gordon's protagonists resemble the witty, self-conscious women in Jane Austen's novels, they, like McCarthy's, live lives that are "fragmented, unstable, ineffectual" and can only be called heroines "ironically" (Brownstein 28). These heroines are all too modern to consciously succumb to the myth that their lives end in marriage. Like Henry James' Isabel Archer, they are foiled, instead, by a thoroughly modern freedom of choice, without the restraints of church and family, and that freedom becomes the conflict of the

¹ Rachel Brownstein. Becoming a Heroine. (New York: Viking Press, 1982).

modern "women's" novel. The difference, however, between a modern "American" heroine and a modern "Irish-Catholic" heroine, lies in the omnipotence of the Irish-Catholic influence even after the religious-cultural heritage has supposedly been discarded.

Mary McCarthy seems to be a sort of literary, and I suggest an even greater role model for Mary Gordon. McCarthy did not publish anything on Gordon's work, and perhaps she would not have enjoyed the fiction as much because of Gordon's feminist revisioning of Catholicism. McCarthy's antipathy toward feminism is well-known. However both writers recognize, in their own lives and the lives of their heroines, what happens to the Catholic girl who wants to be a modern woman who fights to believe in individual and intellectual and sexual freedom, but thwarts herself at every juncture. These heroines are caught between two conflicting ideologies: intellectual/bohemian and Catholic/feminine stereotypes, and they can't mediate between the two.

The fiction of both writers is a working out of this tension, but with satire, humor, irony, recognizing that they themselves have not fully worked out this dichotomy in their own lives. McCarthy's satire of these women who are also herself is tempered by her sympathy for them and their modern predicament. She feels that they have lost something--perhaps this sense of utility, perhaps a sense of knowing what their role as women is--and that the effects of this loss are disastrous. In a Lawrentian sense, the advanced ideas cut them off from reality and their own natures as women. Oddly, it is still a rather feminist position in the way it acknowledges the tension of women torn between two conflicting ideals, a problem which continues today for any woman attempting to break from an orthodox or traditional framework. Despite this, however, McCarthy's obsession with male approbation effectively undermines her heroines; they are fated, by both historical circumstances and McCarthy's dualistic moral sensibility. Mary Gordon is kinder to her heroines, and also offers most of them a chance to integrate the two ideologies. Much more hopeful than McCarthy, she had a Mary McCarthy role

model to emulate. As Isabel Moore says, "I know about the diaphragm. I read Mary McCarthy."

Bonnie Kimie Scott sees a connection between two dissimilar writers and works that can be applied to many works by Irish-American women writers: the Irish-American fiction of the German-American Betty Smith, (author of A Tree Grows in Brooklyn and Joy in the Morning) and Mary McCarthy's autobiography, Memories of a Catholic Girlhood. She believes that Irish-American women writers often "create" young female characters who, while observing "Irish-American experiences in the changing world of the early twentieth century," escape religious and parental restrictions, question "self-sacrifice, bitterness, anger and defiance as the coping mechanisms for various forms of failure at every economic level" but still have a sense of wanting (88, 102). Irish-American women, unlike Irish-American men, have always been marginalized in the Church, and perhaps their double marginalized position allows them to observe and question traditional values and self-destructive responses better than Irish-American male writers. Amory Blaine, Studs Lonigan and Edmund Tyrone would not have recognized the subtly displayed bitter anger of their mothers and sisters as well as McDermott's female narrator does: "...the women seemed to pull the old grievances from kitchen drawers and rattling china cabinets, testing them, it seemed, against the day's peace and proving in this final hour that it had been a temporary and paltry and unreliable peace" (152). The Irish-Catholic hero is not as conscious of the Church's effect on women, for he often leaves, purposefully exiling himself--Blaine for the upper class, Tyrone for the high seas--rather than stay with their Church and families. Heroines, on the other hand, whether they physically leave or not, maintain their connections to their Church and family either through friendships, like Gordon's heroines, or by replicating their childhood situations, like McCarthy's heroines. In other words, the hero rebels through exile, the heroine through equivocation.

Because of her orphaned childhood, her sudden switch from a Catholic household to a Protestant/Jewish one, McCarthy's heroines are much further from the parochialism of the Church than Gordon's, yet their moral choices, and relations with men are as influenced by Catholicism as Gordon's heroines. Yet it is Gordon's recognition of the power of the Church in the lives of women, even if they are no longer practicing Catholics, that allows her heroines something to break away from, some concrete symbol of the authoritative yet comforting community they are, for various reasons, forced to leave. Although Gordon's heroines are often forced by circumstances into accepting autonomy, McCarthy's heroines actively seek it. The difference may be, and it is this that might allow for the hope in Gordon's fiction, that McCarthy's heroines know they have the Church to fall back on, whereas Gordon's heroines can never return for two reasons: Vatican II powerfully changed the imagery and language of the church, and a feminist awakening typical of writers of Gordon's generation would not allow her to regress even if the orthodox church of her childhood still existed.

McCarthy's heroines often have a potent self-knowledge, distinct from any external feminist ideology, but they can never get passed the dualistic splits that limit the individual freedom that they seek. And in The Company She Keeps, Meg Sargent's famous last words suggest that her inner strength comes from her religious background: "Do not let them take this away from me. If the flesh be blind, let the spirit see." The "spirit" is both internal, the mind or soul as opposed to the body, and linked to the external church. Like Isabel in Gordon's Final Payments, McCarthy recognized that the world of her Catholic girlhood had informed her life: "I had left the well-codified Catholic world in which my young childhood had been spent, and in this new world I could no longer tell what was a mortal and what was a venial sin" (Memories 228). The dualistic tension between flesh and soul, between modern values and Catholic values, is echoed in Gordon's fiction. But whereas Gordon's heroines are offered the chance of reconciliation, McCarthy's heroines merely retreat into self-deception with men, a strict,

self-destructive dualism, guilt or even death. Gordon's heroines, even the non-Catholic ones, worry about all these tensions and more, yet because they are more successful at integrating the various frameworks, as well as the fragmented selves that result from this, they are ready to integrate their need for the spiritual with their need for modern sense of individual freedom. This is what many critics of Gordon, including some family members and the Church itself, fear: she is not out to destroy the Church or mock its rites and rituals, but she does wish to revise it, and in the process allow the contemporary Meg Sargents and Martha Sinnots find hope, integration, and life. Reluctantly, Gordon's heroines accept the responsibility of free will, while McCarthy's heroines are foiled by a persistent fatalism, that she connects to, if not blames on, an Irish-Catholicism.

The Limitations and Possibilities of the Irish-Catholic Heroine:

Women in the Orthodox Catholic Church

Mary Gordon notes optimistically that there are many heroic women in Catholic history:

It occurs to me that one good fortune in being brought up a Catholic and a woman was that you did have images of heroic women. And that's not frequently the case in other religious tradition. In the tradition of Catholicism you have a poem spoken by the Virgin Mary which points out her place in the divine order. And she speaks with pride.

(Zinsser 42-3)

But this "divine order" is still male dominated. Catholic women are encouraged to participate in the servitude of God, but only to a certain point; from that point, only men are allowed.

The position of women in the Catholic church is embedded so deeply in Catholic theology that the possibility of allowing women to be priests would do more than simply

shake the foundations of the institution. The early church juggled two seemingly contradictory views of women: Aristotle's belief that a woman has no soul, and the Platonic belief that although women do have souls, they are merely dim reflections of the ideal, male soul. Both male philosophers agreed, however, that women bear the original sin of Eve and sex. So the Church adopted the belief that although women do have souls, they need a male intermediary, and that women are responsible for the fall of Man.

Uta Ranke-Heinemann's controversial study, Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven (1990, English translation), details the misogyny of the Catholic church from its origins to the present. Her argument is well-written wonderfully presented, and has that touch of anger and cynicism that reminds me so much of Mary McCarthy. Her opinions are strong, and perhaps at times slanted, but her facts have been confirmed in many studies on the same topic. Much of her argument is that the Catholic Church retained many pagan or pre-Christian beliefs that they simply adapted to their environment, such as the ideal of virginity and hostility toward marriage, both the result of the connection between sex and sin. However, the "sexual pessimism," as she calls it, of Antiquity was not based on "the curse of sin and punishment for it" as it is in the Church, but rather it was based on relatively pragmatic, though false, medical considerations: sex makes *men* listless and physically weak (which it does if a venereal disease is transmitted).

Classical opinions on the nature of women are rife with contradictions that reverberate in the contemporary Church's confusing position on women. The Greek Stoics (Stoa 300 BC - 250 AD), with their pessimistic world view, rejected the quest for pleasure, and saw marriage as both a way to control the lustful urge, and as an excuse for those who could not renounce pleasure. Aristotle (d. 430) saw marriage as "mutual assistance" but the woman is subordinate. Sexual morality itself, as the keystone of all morality, is said to stem from Seneca, who believed that if one resists lust, one effectively resists all other vices. As Ranke-Heinemann explains:

This gave rise to a controversy among theologians over whether the sin was greater with a beautiful woman or with an ugly one. Petrus Cantor (d. 1197) opined that intercourse with a beautiful woman was a greater sin than with an ugly one, because it gave more delight. Once again, the greater the pleasure, the greater the sin. (159)

According to Ranke-Heinemann, the Church's theology is based on a misinterpretation of the scriptures, particularly when it comes to issues related to women that may be pagan in origin. The ideal of virginity began before Christianity, with several pagan rituals and as seen with the Stoics and the Gnostics who pessimistically believed that all human material life was worthless, and preached abstinence from marriage, meat and wine. Gnostic hostility toward the body infiltrated both the Greeks, who had not previously seen the humans and the world as inherently evil, and the Christians. Christianity's adoption of the Gnostic idealization of virginity (and concept that is seen only to a limited degree in the New Testament), was a way to appeal to and attract the adherents of their competition in religion. And later, Augustine successfully fused the hatred of sex and pleasure with Christianity, influencing Irish Catholicism up to the present.

Augustine's ideas spread from the priest and philosopher Thomas Aquinas (d.1274) through 17th--18th century Jansenism in France and later in Ireland. Augustine taught that the concept of original sin is passed on from Adam and Eve from generation to generation. In his Confessions, he admits to his oversexed nature, but blames not himself as much as the evil of lust, pleasurable sex, and women. Contradicting himself, and influencing the perception of women to this day, according to Ranke-Heinemann, Aristotle believed that the sex act itself is one where women are passive, although they are the ones who in his theory actively tempt men:

Aristotle connected this masculine activity and feminine passivity to the act of generation: the man “begets,” the woman “conceives (=receives) the child. Our linguistic habits have been untouched by the discovery (in 1827) of the ovum by K.E. Von Baer, which proved that women contributed their half to the process of generation. (186)

In Latin, “femina” stands for the inferiority of women: Fe=fides or faith, and mina=minus, or less. A femina is inclined to be easily swayed by the Devil, except for the Virgin Mary who had the strength to resist.

Mariology is the worship of Mary, and is expressed in many ways in each of the many different Catholic cultures on this globe. She provides comfort for both men and women, and for many Catholics, her image is more powerful than Jesus’. Andrew Greeley describes Mary as representing the “mother love of God, the great historic Catholic insight that God loves us as a mother loves a newborn babe” (Catholic Myth 62). Other, more cynical Catholics like John Nealy, see it another way: “Mary, who bore only one son and never experienced sexual pleasure, fulfills an infantile male longing for a mother who had no lover before his birth, and tolerated no rivals afterward” (58). The concept of the Virgin Mary was created by unmarried men, who could only honor a woman who was free from the sin of sexual pleasure. The Virgin Mary is an ideal foil to a more distant, angry God, and pragmatically humanizes God by creating a family for him: mother, child, father. Mary then becomes a role model for Catholic girls, one that is approved by patriarchal authority. As both a virgin and a mother, Mary is a paradoxical role model.

St. Augustine and other Church philosophers had trouble assimilating Christ’s teaching on equality with their own sexism. Augustine decided that only celibate nuns could be equal to men, yet Gregory of Nyssa (331? - 395? AD) believed that “the Eve-like

frailty of women makes them unable to cope with the consequences of knowledge and therefore ill-suited for study” (Nealy 14).²

Of course the systematic belief that women must efface themselves to serve the male is not solely a Catholic phenomenon, but it is perhaps more oppressive because of the injunction that God will reward only those women who submit to the acceptable submissive roles. In 1980 Pope John Paul II publicly declared that feminism is wrong because it puts women on the wrong path toward salvation; choosing to be wives and mothers is the right path. In 1988 the Pope’s meditation on women, Mulieris Dignitatem noted in response for the call to allow women to become priests, that women can gain spiritual glory only within the private sphere. And in 1993 the same pope “called on American bishops to fight ‘a bitter, ideological’ feminism among some Catholic women that led (he said) to ‘forms of nature worship and the celebration of myths and symbols’ usurping traditional celebrations” (Harrison 49).

The Divided Heroine

In Mary Gordon’s Final Payments, Isabel complains when her father’s good friend, Father Mulcahy, refuses to come in to the house for a moment:

I had forgotten; priests were never in houses alone with a woman. Even if the priest were in his seventies and he had known the woman all her life. I felt an inconsolable sense of loss, of having been cheated, and I was angry at this perfectly unnecessary and obtrusive reminder of my sex that the Church was always introducing. (58)

² As noted previously, 1500 years later, Mary Gordon’s parochial school principal refused to write her a reference letter to Barnard College, the site of many an orthodox Catholic or Jewish girl’s defloration, because he feared for her soul.

The Church has always stressed the differences between men and women, and, not surprisingly, Gordon does the same in her fiction. To a lesser extent, McCarthy's dualism is also apparent in her portrayal of male and female characters. In addition, both writers have adopted the Church's particular split of the mind and body, associating men with the former and women with the latter. The nineteenth-century Catholic church, particularly, though not exclusively, the immigrant church in the United States, emphasized in their rituals the "feminine" values of emotionalism, sentimentalism, and docility because the lives of many women centered around the Church. According to historian Jay Dolan, in 1902 73% of the church goers in New York City were women, and the Church encouraged this by trying to appeal to their presumed sentimental side (Dolan 232). Men voted in parish elections, acted as trustees, and of course conducted masses, but women used the church an escape from the poverty and struggle of adapting to a new culture. This gender division is reflected in McCarthy's The Company She Keeps, when Meg describes her house as divided into both male/female spheres, which are depicted also as respectively secular and Catholic:

In a way, it had been better at home, for there the social and religious differences had been given a kind of spatial definition and it was easier to move about. Upstairs there were red votive lamps, altars, and holy pictures (the Sacred Heart, Veronica's veil with the eyes that followed you about the room)...a rich, emotional decor that made the downstairs with its China shepherdesses, Tiffany glass, bronze smoking sets, and family photographs look matter-of-fact and faded, just as the stories in the *Century* in the magazine rack in the living room seemed unendurably tame after the religious fiction she found in her aunt's favorite periodicals...It was as if the Catholic Church began on the landing, where

her father's suite branched off from the stairway that continued on up to her own room, her aunt's room... .(265-6)

The female/Aunt Clara's part of the house is gaudier, but more enticing emotionally, whereas her father's part of the house is staid, secular, unemotional. This same dichotomy between the sexes is seen in Gordon's The Company of Women, when Cyprian lectures Felicitas on the differences between being "womanish" and being "orthodox" in respect to Catholicism:

It was womanish to say the rosary during mass. It was womanish to carry pastel holy cards and stitched novena booklets...It was womanish to believe in happiness on earth, to be a Democrat, to care to be spoken to in a particular tone of voice, to dislike curses, whiskey and the smell of sweat...The opposite of womanish was orthodox. The Passion of Christ was orthodox, the rosary said in private (it was most orthodox to prefer the sorrowful mysteries), the Stations of the Cross, devotion to the Holy Ghost, responding to the mass in Latin, litanies of the Blessed Virgin and the saints... . (43)

For Cyprian, who represents the orthodox Church, the distinction between the sexes is based on a stereotypical, feminine sensibility that eventually Felicitas recognizes, with anxiety, as misogynistic: "She was female. She did not have money. And she hated nuns. What's more, she lied to get a fool to like her. How, then would God find her?" (65).

The dichotomy between the sexes reinforced by the Church is related to the classical mind/body problem. McCarthy's biographer, Carol Brightman, in her analysis of the loss of virginity scene in How I Grew, recognizes that the fourteen year old McCarthy's

natural desire for sex needs to be tamed by the more powerful mind of the adult McCarthy. In many of the sex scenes in her fiction, the women characters need to distance themselves from the messiness of the physical by exerting the distancing order of the mind. For example, in A Charmed Life, Martha's comfortable, yet increasingly estranged marriage to John Sinnot is placed in sharp contrast with her more physical, passionate, yet dangerous marriage with her ex-husband, Miles. Her eventual submission to Miles ultimately leads to her death, and the lesson that when the mind loses control of the body, only trouble can result. Helen, Miles' second wife, is Martha's opposite: unlike Martha, she does not stimulate Miles intellectually, but she is a much more caring person to him. Martha and Helen are two halves of a whole, and there are few McCarthy characters who are able to integrate the mind and the body. Of course, Irish-Catholic male writers, F. Scott Fitzgerald and James T. Farrell in particular, often portrayed women as the embodiment of either dangerous sexuality or secure motherhood. Fitzgerald's Nicole Diver's sexuality is even suggested as part of her insanity.

The stories of saints have great influence on many Catholic women writers: the narratives are sensationally appealing because of their gruesomeness and because of the idealization of women who sacrifice themselves for God; at times, however, these saints are quite assertive and powerful women in their own right. When McCarthy was at the St. Joseph's Elementary school she wanted to be either an abbess or St. Teresa of Avila, "effaced, selfless," but as Professor Moore says to Isabel in Final Payments: "someone who would found orders and insult recalcitrant bishops, not someone who would submit to having dirty water thrown on her by her sister in Christ... ." (29-30). When McCarthy is rebuked by her Grandfather Preston in her attempt to save his Protestant soul, she is thrilled: "It put me solidly in the tradition of the saints and martyrs... ." (Memories 91). The contradictory influences of the lives of the saints is apparent in The Company of Women. As a young girl, Felicitas Marie Taylor ("named after the one virgin martyr whose name contained some hope for ordinary happiness") is disgusted at women saints

for their "astonishing lack of backbone" (62). Yet, a few years later, in a description of her professor and soon to be lover, Robert, she thinks:

When he touched her arm to open the heavy door for her, she was afraid and hopeful that his fingers had left a mark on her clothing, like a shroud of Turin or Veronica's veil. She felt the burning of her flesh beneath his fingers...And when, after a second, he took his hand away, she felt the strongest deprivation of her life. (106)

She later ponders growing her hair so she could dry away Robert's tears (in Corinthians 11:10, the Apostle Paul "view women's long hair, which has been given them as a natural veil, as a sign of their subjection to man" (Ranke-Heinemann 130)), and her mother responds, " 'Forget it...You're not the type'" (101).

Sainthood requires a renunciation of the self for the good of the community and a delaying of happiness until the next life. For those in the community, taking on the role of saint, nun, good daughter or mother is looked upon with approval. Isabel, in giving up her self for her father, is seen by the neighborhood as a "good" Catholic girl, saint-like in her devotion. Later in the novel, when she retreats to the hateful Margaret's house, she does not get the same approbation because she is no longer in her neighborhood, and because her attempted retreat to a more comfortable, if limited, role, is a more masochistic sacrifice. At least sacrificing for her father was respected, and as a theology professor, he is often equated with the Church. Wilfred Sheed remarked that Isabel's sacrifice for Margaret is that of "a nun without a God is a fool" (Sheed 260). But the Church makes no such distinction: the unlovable deserve our sacrifices as much as the lovable, no matter how much loss of self one suffers. Suffering, according to orthodox Catholicism, is "the catalyst that gives each soul its essential nature" (Bell 9).

But for all its sexism, Catholicism does seek to create a select community of the faithful, that becomes for many of those who follow the rituals and rules of the Church a secure haven from the outside world. The language of the Church reinforces this idea of family with titles such as *Father, Mother Superior, Sister, Brother*. Dualistically, as we have come to recognize in much of the Catholic Church, the titles instill a close bond, and at the same time maintain the distance of authority. Father and Mother are not the same as Dad and Mom.

Myn Owene Woman?

Final Payments is full of allusions to the shelter of the Church which provides an identity within the community that is too difficult to break away from, "something outside myself, and larger"; it offers the unchanging nature of God, "the secret of His great appeal"; and it is the one thing you could be "entirely sure of." When Isabel leaves her father's house to recreate herself, she feels excited about calling the phone company because "[i]t made me feel protected and attached to large benevolent forces."

The Church denies help for those who do not follow its rules. Both Isabel and McCarthy's Meg Sargent begin to pray to God before they remember that they no longer have that comfort or right. The Church is able to keep its members by providing a sense of community and refuge so powerful that its loss could be debilitating. Yet this omnipotence can be comforting in the way that a family is, in theory, always there for you no matter how the outside world treats you. But it can also breed a childish dependence in its members, as Isabel notes: "Both Father Mulcahy and my father were children, and their love made the exhausting demands of a child's. Perhaps it was because they were used to loving God, Who found nothing exhausting" (FP 60). This childishness is also seen in the heroines themselves.

The heroines of Gordon and McCarthy seek to replace the security and authority of the church they have left with other groups or with men, and many of their critics complain

about this, misunderstanding it for a desire for the selfishness of a secular life in Gordon's fiction, or misogyny in McCarthy's. But the concept of authority, and the respect for that concept, is foreign to most Americans. Paul Giles notes that "Thoreau's rebellious individualism and essentializing of 'nature' becomes an orthodox and Constitutionally guaranteed form of behavior, while Catholic deference to authority comes to be seen as unorthodox and even threatening" (48). To most Americans, "authority" is only recognized as a public institution, like the Transit Authority. The authority of the Church requires its members to submit to the hierarchy, obligations, duties and laws. To suddenly have that structure removed, however disempowering, is disorienting to the heroines.

As she herself was, Mary McCarthy's heroines are much further removed from the church than Gordon's, and so their nostalgia of the authoritarian church is subsumed into a need to be part of a group and a need for a strong man. Both writers lost their fathers at about the same age, fathers who greatly formed their minds as intellectuals. The loss of their biological fathers at age six (and for McCarthy, also her mother) prefigures the loss of the church in their early teens and both events influence their desire to replace the male father figure and the authoritative shelter of the Church. McCarthy wrote, however cynically, that she has "seldom been capable of living without love, not for more than a month or so" (Intellectual Memoirs 52), and that "there must have been something in me that brought out the pedagogue in a young man... ." (How I Grew 89). In their fiction, both writers attempt to negotiate the results of this early loss: Gordon often has her characters fear the unpredictable, fragile, insecure and dangerous, fatherless world, and McCarthy's heroines spend their lives looking for some faithful authority to replace their fathers, yet they often end up with false fathers.

Despite their natural self-assertiveness with men, McCarthy's heroines submit quickly to male authority. In The Company She Keeps, Mr. Breen, the Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt, becomes not just a middle-aged man trying to pick her up, but the voice of authority to Meg, and when he speaks to her harshly after their night of rough

sex, he reminds her of all the other authority figures of her childhood, "the betrayers, the friendly enemies, the Janus-faced overseers, back to the mother who could love you and then die" (115). As soon as he reminds her of her father, she begins to invest in him qualities he may not have. In her short story "The Weeds," the wife eventually runs away from her husband, but when he finds her she returns to him, giving in to his will which is stronger than hers. Even the nearly asexual McCarthy-persona of The Groves of Academe, Domna, is swayed by the authority, however false, of Henry Mulcahy: "Whenever she saw, or thought she saw, excellence, she had a summary impulse to make others bow the knee to it, as she did" (126). The women from The Group (except for the asexual Helena and lesbian Lakey) also allow their men to control them: Kay accepts Harald's verbal abuse, Priss allows her husband to impose a strict breastfeeding schedule on her, and the fairy tale princess Polly allows her senile father to spend all her money.

While McCarthy's heroines bow to men who generally do not deserve their submission, Gordon's heroines choose men who are as strict, judgmental and as powerful as the Church. Isabel's father and her lover Robert, of Final Payments, both are professors who have personal authority backed up by institutions: the church, the college. Father Cyprian of The Company of Women, is described as being "armed against [Felicitas]; he had weapons that could kill" (42) such as faith in God and the power of God, but it goes beyond God, to what is described as an almost innate masculinity that McCarthy and Gordon's heroines are deeply attracted to:

But she was more like her mother than she was like Cyprian. She was not a man. She had seen other men do that. She had seen that look on the fathers of her friends. It said, "In this world you are not important." It said, "I." It said, "Obey me only."

When Cyprian wanted her to do what her mother didn't want

her to, she didn't know what to do. But she did what Cyprian told her.
 He was a priest. Chosen by God and anointed. No woman could be.

(CW 34)

Felicitas recognizes the power of men invested in them by patriarchal society, and confirmed by the Catholic Church. When he is most desperate to keep her childish trust in him, Cyprian puts a gun to her head and pulls the trigger to force her to trust him (the gun is merely a cigarette lighter, but Felicitas does not know this). When Mr. Breen (the Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt) smacks Meg on her backside during intercourse he wants to gain control over this young woman who thinks she is "myne owne woman."³ Both Felicitas and Meg, and many of the other heroines try desperately to separate themselves from the seduction of authority and gain their own authority, but they are foiled by, as Isabel points out, "concern for what people thought and felt... ." (90). All the heroines are deeply anxious about what others think of them, a remnant, perhaps, of their childhood training in fitting into the circle, taking on one of the prescribed identities. Meg Sargent is a character of many sides, suiting her personality to fit into the crowd she is with at the moment, the fragmented identities of the contemporary woman.

Without a father/church the heroines are no longer rewarded for being good girls, and must maneuver the shifting grounds beneath them to find a new place to situate themselves. In that attempt, they try to re-anchor themselves in other father-like ports in order to avoid the messiness of a world without a fixed authority. The search for a replacement is depicted, particularly in their first novels, as an odd replica of the Holy Trinity, or perhaps, Freud's Oedipal Complex: for Meg Sargent, there is her father, Mr. Breen or Frederick, and Aunt Clara. For Isabel Moore, there is her father, Hugh and Margaret. It is as if this triumvirate must be renegotiated, as with Meg, or revised, as with Isabel, in order for each heroine to move beyond her paralysis. Meg recognizes,

³ Interestingly, the Criseyde who spoke these words was ultimately not in control of her own fate.

belatedly, that when she is in a relationship she often sounds like her Aunt Clara, a stupid, coarse woman who controlled Meg's life after her mother's death. Mr. Breen, (closer to McCarthy's true father than she realizes), and Frederick, (who resembles McCarthy's false father, Uncle Myers), are merely replacements for her father, and thus not appropriate husbands. McCarthy herself admitted that she married Edmund Wilson, who was many years her senior, perhaps as a reaction to her Grandfather Preston's death, though, as Joseph Epstein suggests, he ended up more like Uncle Myers (44). Meg Sargent eventually realizes that she is repeating as an adult the patterns of her childhood, and finds no way out of the repetition. Isabel, too, repeats and retreats to the patterns of her childhood when she falls in love with the authoritative Hugh and then leaves him to return to care for Margaret who, like Aunt Clara is pitiful, and sentimentally religious. Unlike Meg, however, Isabel has women friends, so after she recognizes the distorted repetition of her childhood patterns, she can call on them to help her get out of the rut. Meg, however, only has Dr. James who is as devastated as Meg is at the repetition in her life.

Both writers are aware of and obsessed with this particular idealization of the father, "that romance of the distant father" as Anne Foster puts it in Men and Angels (44). And both writers recognize the danger in this form of romance, just as McCarthy deconstructs the idealization of utopists, intellectuals and bohemians in her fiction. In her short story "The Neighborhood" Gordon's protagonist says, "My father died when I was seven and from then on I believed the world was dangerous" (TS 53). Both writers grew up as only daughters, smart enough to be the apples of their fathers' eyes. In the first page of How I Grew, McCarthy modestly notes, "Almost from the beginning, I had been aware of myself as 'bright.'" Her father encouraged her to entertain him with her jokes, wit and charm. Her father taught her how to read, while sitting on his lap before she started school.⁴ She remembers reading the books in his library, and even then

⁴ This small detail reveals an interesting juxtaposition of intellect and body, a connection that is evident in all of McCarthy's autobiographies and many of her novels.

dualistically arranges the books she remembers by gender: “I can feel a consistent manly taste...(Black Beauty, on the other hand, which was a bit on the goody side, had surely been our mother’s)” (How I Grew 4). McCarthy recognized that her parents’ deaths eventually led her at age twelve, after six years with the horrid Myers and Margaret where the only book available to her was The Lives of the Saints, to her Grandfather Preston and a world outside of the insulated Catholic, bourgeois environment that she surely would have had if her parents had survived. It was her Calvinistic, though open-minded, Protestant Grandfather and self-hating Jewish Grandmother that introduced her to another world: her grandfather to a world of logic, justice and reason, and her grandmother to the world of beauty and taste. But even this dichotomy is easily torn: her grandfather angrily stormed into the nun’s office when he heard that his granddaughter was compared with Byron, and her grandmother’s desire for beauty led to a slightly disfiguring scar as a result of a botched face lift.

Mary Gordon once said that it was her father’s Jewishness that gave her a license to speak out against her Irish-Catholic heritage (Keyishian 81), and it is this same crossed heritage that might have given McCarthy an outsider’s perspective on many of the groups she later joined. Gordon has, until recently, not published as much on her father (“The Important Houses,” published in The New Yorker in 1993, is an excerpt from an upcoming autobiography that does reveal pieces of her childhood). Her father did give Gordon the authority to speak her mind, and she believes that she never could have gone to Barnard without his early influence. Like McCarthy’s father, he taught her to read at age three, and French at age six. Being with her father made her “as happy as a couple in a movie musical...I believed everything I did was of the greatest importance to my father, and would be till the end of time, and then beyond that, in eternity” (41). Again like McCarthy’s grandfather, Gordon’s father had another side to him: “Though an immensely literate man, he ripped out pages of books he did not like and was a very ‘unphysical’ man. Gordon says she is not sure how she was conceived” (Payant 130).

Although she has not written as much on her early childhood years as McCarthy, Gordon's fiction is rife with references to fathers, both positive and negative: "I'd never lived with adult males; their rage was as foreign to me as space talk, and as terrifying" ("Billy" in TS 163). But, for the most part, references to fathers in both writers' fiction are positive. There is almost an incestuous element to this: in their fiction, the boyfriends and husbands are father figures, in their lives, their fathers were their heroes. There is a parallel here to the Church, which like the fathers, saves girls from the dangers of the world, but only as long as they remain good girls, and even then, the father can die. Gordon writes: "It was easy for me to please my father; and this ease bred in me a desire to please men--a desire for the rewards of a good girl. They are no means inconsiderable: safety and approval...and protection from the risk of one's own judgments" (Good Boys 151).

Both writers create heroines who are like the biblical Mary rather than Martha: the favored, chosen ones, the bright ones honored by the men in their lives. These men represent the authority and protection of the church, and although both writers broke away from the church as young adults, in their fiction at least, their characters repetitively reattach themselves to these types of men. Isabel says, "But how could I describe my father in less than monumental proportions... ." (132). He is the creator of her life, God-like" both present and absent in his debilitating stroke as God, as "dreadful" and loving as God. And although Isabel gives up her faith before her father dies, she responds to his death as if he were God, and life becomes to her too dangerous, messy and meaningless all at the same time. He raised her to be a sort of Mary, and when she is caught having sex, he expects her to give birth to a child as both punishment for her sin, and confirmation of the identity he has thrust upon her willing shoulders. Isabel thinks:

As a reward for the loss of a normal life, [Mary] became the mother of God. As the daughter of my father, I thought my fate as inevitable

as hers, as forcefully imposed, as impossible to question. I could no more refuse my father than Mary could have refused the angel coming upon her... . (195)

Isabel's great fear is that no one will ever love her like her father did, with his authority supported by the Church. Girls who lose their fathers at an earlier age than Isabel do not have it any better: Felicitas: "A fatherless girl thinks all things possible and nothing safe" (251). And from the father's perspective, Dan in The Other Side ponders on his daughter, Staci, and her desperate need to keep herself in control and safe from disturbing feelings and people: "He could see that by his leaving he had taken from the cradle that first ordinary gift of youth, belief, and cut its throat" (348).

Fairy Tales and Nightmares

The heroines of both writers often retreat into the fairy tale world in their descriptions of the relations between men and women. McCarthy's Meg Sargent, after the raucous sex with Mr. Breen, relaxes into the orderly, civilizing meal that reminds her of the endings of fairy tales. The title of her novel, A Charmed Life reminds one of a fairy tale, as does the opening description of Martha: "Martha sewing tranquilly, like some Protestant pastor's wife in an old tale, her mother's gold thimble on her finger. And like the wife sewing in the fairy tale, Martha was wishing for a child" (5). But Martha is no Protestant, and she is not in a fairy tale. These are the deceptions that play a role in her death at the end of the novel. The fairy tale turns nightmarish later in the book when she sleeps with her ex-husband Miles, who is described as a monster, and "for her to have lain with him, breeding, was a sort of hideous perversion, like sleeping with your wicked uncle." But not all her fairy tales are thus fractured. As many critics have noticed, Polly Andrews of The Group is McCarthy's most kindly portrayal of a young

woman.⁵ Polly, like the other girls, suffers from the tenor of her times by having an affair with a married, though separated, man named Gus who, with the silent “help” of his psychologist, eventually returns to his manipulative wife. But when Polly’s manic-depressive father comes to live with her, and she is forced to sell her blood to pay for his spending sprees, she attracts the sympathy of a doctor who dismisses psychotherapy in favor of the science of facts. He rescues Polly from her poverty, her father’s illness, and the Gus’s of the world, and they live happily ever after. Strangely, McCarthy’s cynicism seems to have escaped her in her portrait of Polly, in sharp contrast to her attacks on other members of the Group: her unsympathetic pity for Kay, her dissection of Norine.

Gordon has also been accused of creating fairy tales in her fiction. Although McCarthy’s portrait of a wicked stepmother appears as Meg’s Aunt Clara only briefly, Isabel’s Margaret is an extension of her character and is portrayed in more detail; Cynthia, Hugh’s wife, is a divorced rather than spinster version of both Meg and Clara. Like Meg, Isabel rebels from this nasty mother-figure, yet both recognize that it is not so easy to leave them behind: Meg finds herself speaking like Clara, Isabel returns to Margaret. And with both Margaret and Cynthia, Isabel is transformed into a vulnerable child, unable to fight back, as if she is under their spell (Smiley 224). Unlike in the fairy tales, however, there is no one to save Meg from the wicked witch of Clara except herself, for Dr. James is a poor substitute for a fairy godmother, and Frederick is no prince. Meg has to rely solely on herself to escape. Isabel runs from Cynthia to Margaret, but has the encouragement of Hugh’s letter, the Good Friday words of Jesus, and the kind priest, all of which allow her to call Liz and Eleanor who will help her heal herself before she returns to her prince, Hugh. The witch/stepmother figure reappears with Muriel in The Company of Women, and once again Felicitas is protected from her by her knight Cyprian who uses the older woman’s love for him for his physical comfort (she takes care of him

⁵ John Chamberlain perceives “tenderness in the portrait of Polly Andrews, an adorable and loyal woman whose values force a curiously respectful shift in the normally disrespectful McCarthy style” (355).

like a maid). Muriel hates Felicitas, is jealous of her status as the favored one, but, because she is rejected by the priest, her power to harm Felicitas is minimal.

The return to the fairy tale in their fiction is not surprising; the fairy tale world is one of the dualistic concepts of pure good and pure evil, echoing the Catholic duality and morality both writers have adapted in their work. It also relates significantly to the themes and issues in their fiction, particularly relationships with men. As both women recognize the ill-fated romance of the distant father, they also dramatize the romance of the tragic hero. Directly related to the desire for security and authority is the desire to find it in men. There is a power struggle between the men and women in the fiction of McCarthy and Gordon that resonates with the dualism expected in their works: men are both dangerous yet sheltering, punishing yet needy. The heroines are both independent yet dependent, self-absorbed and self-sacrificing.

The War Between the Sexes

As many critics have noted, there seems to be a gap between the way McCarthy lived her life, and the way her heroines' lives are thwarted; a gap between the way she lived her life, and the way she thought women should live their lives. How does one reconcile the young Mary McCarthy who is never given a pink ribbon for good conduct because the nuns, perhaps, sensed her inability to submit, to the older Mary who says she prefers a man who is superior to her? A woman who claims she slept with over one hundred men, but loved being married. According to her friend (and later Mary Gordon's literary advisor and mentor) Elizabeth Hardwick, "[McCarthy] had no talent at all for the single life, or even for waiting after a divorce, a break. However once married, she made a strikingly independent wife, an abbess within the cloister, so to speak" (6). When she did fall in love, the men often reminded her of her Grandfather Preston; they were laconic, severe, magnanimous, detached (Memories 154).

Ironically, neither the single life nor marriage are portrayed very sympathetically in McCarthy's fiction. All her heroines seem to delude themselves that the choices they have made are the right ones. Meg Sargent says she feels safer and in control with men who are somehow defective, yet she ends up with men who take away her control as soon as they are able, especially with Mr. Breen (at first) and Frederick. The first chapter of The Company She Keeps, "Cruel and Barbarous Behavior," humorously depicts how Meg's plan to leave her husband for a lover is foiled because both men refuse to respond to the drama of the moment, and, most importantly, they are simply too nice. Even Mr. Breen's eventual downfall is that he is too nice for Meg, despite the rough sex and the authoritative attitude. And the Yale man, someone she may have had a good relationship with, considering they were both politically liberal, and from the same middle-class background, is too much like her for them to get along. For Meg, relationships with men are merely a game, one that she hopes to always win, where a strong, severe opponent is necessary, yet when she loses, as she does temporarily with Mr. Breen, she cries "no fair." When he tells Meg that he is happy with her she thinks, "this was the climax the spiritual orgasm" (129). Winning a man's lust and affection is better than the actual sex. Later, when he wants to make love again, "she fought him off; though she had an inclination to yield, if only to re-establish her ascendancy over him" (132). She uses sex to get what she wants--control over men.

At the same time, McCarthy's heroines want to replace the God they have with men they can serve. Meg obliquely admits this when she refers to her therapist as Frederick's (her husband's) "apostolic delegate." She admits to marrying him for penance from past wrongs, as a nun would join a convent for spiritual security. In a 1979 interview McCarthy herself admits that she likes to serve: "I rather like a certain amount of structure and hierarchy...I enjoy the sensation of looking up...I also like marriage and domesticity" (Conversations 176). But there's a basic contradiction to what McCarthy says and what she writes, a contradiction she probably sensed within herself.

The marriages in her fiction are some of the most stultifying ones in literature. In her short story "The Weeds" (1944), the wife, even though her husband tries to understand her, must eventually lie to her husband in order to keep the peace; she finds it easier to present a false self and be with him than to live alone with her own true, but flawed, self. When she does run away to a hotel, she wishes desperately that some other man, no matter who he is, will save her: "the credit manager might yet be the Savior, who, as holy legend tells us, appears in strange disguises" (20). Meg and Frederick's marriage at the end of Company is suffocating; Kay of The Group is emotionally and physically abused in her marriage with Harald; Priss is used rather than loved by her husband the pediatrician; Norine cheats on her impotent husband, Blake (impotent because his passion is subsumed by radical causes); and Dottie marries to escape the pain and passion of lust and love. Only Polly marries a potentially "good" man, Jim, who is a doctor, but then her relationship is deliberately set up to be a fairy tale.

In A Charmed Life, Martha Sinnot's second marriage to John is more stable than her first to Miles, but ultimately not as satisfying, and it comes back to the power struggle: she hated having the power to deceive John, and she wishes he could see through her, tell her who she is, and recognize her deceptions. The paradox is that only a man as evil as Miles could see through her. Despite a desire for masculine authority, there is also a contradictory urge to usurp it. Martha's struggle with Miles (who greatly resembles Edmund Wilson, despite McCarthy's protests to the contrary), included competing with him, as if to show up her old mentor: like him, she goes for a doctorate in Philosophy, takes up playwriting, and desires a baby. Of course Miles, the philosopher, psychologist, playwright, father, recognizes this: "There it was, that pattern of imitation."

Marriages are not ideal institutions in McCarthy's fiction. Carol Brightman has remarked that McCarthy used each of her four husbands to gain the security, both financial

and emotional, that she needed to write.⁶ Her first husband could be seen as a bridge between college (she married right after graduation) and real life, the second, to Edmund Wilson, is more obviously a beneficial relationship to a budding writer. Her third husband, Broadwater, took care of the house and Reuel, and James West, by most accounts, was her only marriage based on love, though even his emotional and financial stability helped McCarthy and her writing.

Gordon's heroines are no better in their relationships. Like Martha Sinnot, the narrator of "The Other Woman" struggles with her husband's inability to understand and guess her feelings, and his failure makes her hate him. Despite herself, she comforts him:

But since she was a woman, her body had been bred to deceit. How easy it was for her, quite mechanically...And he settled into her false comfort, pressing against her body for relief. She knew that he would never know what she was feeling, and knowing this, she had never loved him so little. (TS 156)

Like Martha and Meg, Gordon's heroines are attracted to men's power, so when their power weakens, they are no longer attractive. The narrator of "Now I am Married" admits: "What I want, he says, is unlimited power. He is right. I love him because he is powerful, because he will let me have only my fair share... ." (139).⁷

Francine DuPlessix Gray confirms that the theme of Gordon's The Company of Women is "the perils of an overzealous search for a savior in human guise" (1). Felicitas is as strong a woman as Isabel, as Martha and Meg, yet like them, she is victimized by her desire for a strong, god-like male figure of authority. The only male figure in her

⁶ Avis Gray Hewitt observed that McCarthy's most successful marriage was to a non-writer, James West.

⁷ Perhaps not so coincidentally, Mary Gordon is married to a man who is considerably older than herself.

childhood is Father Cyprian, an exiled orthodox priest who attracts women admirers, but is himself a misogynist. But he needs these women because it is only with them that he has a family, having renounced his own family many years earlier. He becomes a mentor to Felicitas, and invests in her for his future, where she will be his savior from loneliness and old age. As much as Felicitas sees both Cyp and other men as providing a haven from the dangers of the world, Cyp, at least, needs her even more, and his need is overpowering:

He needed her now; he needed the assurance of her safety. He had chosen her. He was a man, and men were cursed with a terrible loneliness they could not speak of. So deep, so ragged was the loneliness in him that she could no more refuse it than forget her name. (66)

He smothers her with this need, forcing her to leave. When she transfers to Columbia, from the small local Catholic college, she meets and falls for Robert, her political science professor, who has Cyp's authority, but not his love for her. Despite this, she does everything Robert asks of her, and when he tells her to sleep with his friend Richard to get over her clinging to Robert, she does. Of course Richard is too grateful, too much the good boy, to be a real object of Felicitas's demanding desire for authority.

She gets pregnant, and like Martha Sinnot, who also shares a fateful, ironic name, she does not know which man is the father. Unlike the older, more experienced, and more self-deluding Martha, however, Felicitas cannot go through the abortion, and she ends up raising her daughter in the company of Father Cyp and his women in a rural New York state town. She retreats to the safety of their company, but without recognizing that it is the women, not Cyp or her boyfriend Leo, who offer her real shelter, without asking for anything in return. Because of her brief experience with Robert, and

the now-dying Cyp, she hates and fears, yet still needs men. She is chosen by Leo, “the most desirable man in our area,” and admits that she still loves to be chosen by an expert, and it is this desire that keeps her forever dependent on a particular man’s gaze:

I wonder what abuse a woman has to go through at the hands of a man before she gives up the inward flicker of delight, like the click and flame of a cheap cigarette lighter, at being chosen? Where did we learn that definition of honor? As long as it is there, we are never really independent. (250)

It leads back to her father-less childhood; as a result, the fatherless daughter feels that men are both sheltering and dangerous, and why she, at least, needs to give in to marriage: “It is for shelter that we marry and make love” (235). But Felicitas seems unable to recognize the other options. Like Meg, she settles for the inner knowledge of her self-deception, rather than seek the means to overcome this dependent position. She merely hopes that Leo’s presence in her daughter’s life will prevent her from seeking this seemingly innate and destructive need for approval from men.

Writing about McCarthy, but also relevant to Gordon, feminist critic Theresa Shinn defines as McCarthy’s conservatism her heroine’s desire for men who can provide “an external framework for her women, a form of dependency which can help them understand themselves and which will take responsibility from them” (90). And as a result there is an anger toward men that comes out in both their writings, toward men who cannot possibly live up to this ideal. Both writers dichotomize male and female behavior, and stack the deck so that any relationship between a man and woman is ultimately fraught with serious tension. There seems to be a lack of faith that love between a man and a woman is possible. Martha and John’s marriage fails just when they expect it to, in the seventh year. It is as if in the attempt to rid the self of self-delusions in McCarthy’s

heroines, and to purge oneself of the destructive romance felt too early in Gordon's heroines, there is nothing left but depression and cynicism.

The Sado-Masochistic Irish-Catholic Heroine

This pessimism carries over into the sexual lives of the heroines. In Gordon's first two novels, in McCarthy's first novel and her autobiographies, the development of the heroine's mind and independent thought is entwined with a sexual awakening. This is not surprising in itself. But both novelists have great difficulty describing sex, and their characters also have trouble with the sex act: it requires too much loss of control, it is too messy, it is a sin. The need for authority and shelter in men as a replacement for the Catholic Church is an entirely asexual desire. The Irish-Catholic Church in particular, and the history of Catholicism in general, has taken great steps to keep the service of God asexual. The hostility to pleasure and the body, as I have discussed previously, was not part of the original Christian theology but an adaptation during Antiquity of the Gnostic hatred of the material world and the body. It was only later that the Irish-Catholic Church connected sex with sin and punishment, linking sex only with procreation, not pleasure.

And it is the sexual female body that is the source of the sin. Thus we get the gruesome stories of the women saints who starved, beat, burned themselves, and were sacrificed by other, and even Gordon's confession that as a young girl she walked with rocks in her shoes as punishment for her sins. The heroines all get into trouble as soon as they are introduced to or participate in sex: McCarthy's Martha dies on the way to the abortionist, Isabel retreats back to Margaret.

Meg Sargent's father, who strictly kept her from the presence of boys, (echoing McCarthy's Grandfather Preston), made her feel unclean, dualistically dividing the world for her, as the Church does, a dualism she can't escape:

The terrible female vulgarity of blood, the Sacred Heart dripping gore,

Saint Sebastian with the arrows, the dark red of the votive lamps, and the blue robe of the Madonna, the color of the veins in one's wrists. How schematically it had all been lived out, the war between the flesh and the spirit, between women and men... (290)

In How I Grew, McCarthy saw the mind as bringing order to the chaos and messiness of the body. A fourteen year old McCarthy has sex in a car, and afterwards escapes back into her schoolwork, quite pleased to have gotten that out of the way: it "dampened my curiosity about sex and so left my mind free to think about other things" (64). She claims that in order to take "the last trace of sin out of sex" she makes herself relive that horrid first time until it loses its power to shame her, becoming just another intellectual, educational lesson. She suggests that this is what all young girls of the 1920s were trying to accomplish, but McCarthy's Irish-Catholic background adds resonance to the words "sin" and "shame."

In 1963, on the Jack Paar show promoting The Group, Paar goads McCarthy into flirtatious conversation about sex. Playing along, McCarthy asserts that sex is either comic or disgusting, and that it is "indecent to write about happy sex." As a satiric writer about, among other things, the proverbial war between the sexes, in her fiction sex is not equated with love but the power struggle between men and women. In her short story "Unspoiled Reaction," McCarthy describes sex with terms more appropriate to the battle field: "And as for the seating arrangement, perhaps in the modern world all spontaneity had to be planned; with crop control and sex, the 'unspoiled reaction' did not come of itself; it was the end-product of a series of maneuvers" (99). In the modern world where everything is a struggle for power, sex becomes merely one more way of getting it; the young girl's idealism associated with sex is no longer possible.

The autobiographical chapter of The Company She Keeps, "The Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt," is one example of a McCarthy heroine's epiphany that she has

lost her idealism; in this case she recognizes that she is not the sexually free and independent woman role she has adopted: "It was true, she was always wanting something exciting and romantic to happen; but it was not really romantic to be the-girl-who-sits-in-the-club car-and-picks-up-men" (Company 84). Meg, the girl in the club car, later tells us that her early romantic sensibility--and obviously McCarthy's--was tempered by a vulgar Catholic Aunt Clara: "the raw melodrama of those early years was a kind of affront to her skeptical, prosaic intelligence" (264). She tries to be what her Aunt Clara was not: realistic, not romantic, witty, not trite.

Meg Sargent learns that freedom is lonely, and she feels so guilty about the sex she turns to in order to relieve the loneliness that she idealizes sex into an act of self-sacrifice, rather than the sordid mess the puritanical McCarthy thinks it is. Since Margaret remembers her Catholic childhood as being easy because "the Church could classify it all for you" by telling you what was good or bad, sex with Mr. Breen must become a sacrifice to be a good act:

The glow of self-sacrifice illuminated her. This, she thought decidedly, is going to be the only real act of charity I have ever performed in my life; it will be the only time I have ever given anything when it honestly hurt me to do so...it was the mortification of the flesh achieved through the performance of the act of pleasure. (Company 114)

Margaret has turned a sexual encounter into a moral choice, an abstraction, so that she does not have to take the responsibility for her decision.

Most of McCarthy's heroines are negatively affected by the new-found sexual and intellectual liberation of the Twenties and Thirties. They are usually unable to sustain a healthy relationship with a man (or a woman--Meg Sargent is seemingly friendless, and the Vassar girls do not give us great models for friendship). And although they are

sexually free enough, sex had to uphold their ideal of themselves as liberated women is disappointing, and even, at least to McCarthy, disgusting. Meg allows herself to get drunk with the Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt:

Waves of shame began to run through her, like savage internal blushes, as fragments of the night before presented themselves for inspection . . . She had felt tired and kind, and thought, why not?...There were (oh, holy Virgin!) four-letter words that she had been forced to repeat, and, at the climax, a rain of blows on her buttocks that must surely (dear God!) have left bruises. (Company 106)

Notice the religious exclamations.

And as with all the details of real life, the intellectual woman mentalizes sex. In The Group, in the middle of her first sexual experience, Dotty analyzes her orgasm:

According to Kay, a climax was something very unusual, something the husband brought about by carefully studying his wife's desires and by patient manual stimulation. The terms made Dottie shudder, even in memory; there was a horrid bit, all in Latin, in Krafft-Ebbing, about the Empress Maria Theresa and what the court doctor told her consort to do that Dottie had glanced at quickly and then tried to forget. (Group 42-3)

At the end of The Group, Dottie chooses to escape the reality of her lust for Dick by marrying a man she does not love. McCarthy doesn't bother to give her story an ending: after her famous diaphragm scene, after her decision to be dishonest to her feelings, the character is basically dismissed from the novel.

The Company She Keeps not only satirizes the idealism of the Thirties, but personalizes it with a woman's touch. I don't mean this as a criticism, although some, like Kazin, would: "Among disillusioned radicals, Mary served as governess in the new correctness toward which they were moving. She reminded them of the classical learning they had never acquired, the niceties of style they had despised, the social lapses they could no longer overlook" (Kazin 156). But Kazin's description of her as a social debutante for Trotskyists is not too far from the truth. McCarthy's fiction focuses not on political issues themselves, but the effect of the radical life on one's personal life. In Company we get Meg's search for her real self which is buried beneath a bohemian costume.

Meg Sargent is McCarthy's most overtly Catholic heroine. Her every contemplated action is debated first as to whether or not it is moral; everything is a potential symbol to guide her in her decisions: the safety pin in her underwear is transformed from an embarrassment to a symbol of moral fastidiousness, with a positive moral value rather than simple carelessness. Having sex with a stranger on a train is rationalized, too. Along with her sense of sacrificing herself to Mr. Breen, an act of charity and penance because by giving in to him "she was really and truly good, not hard or heartless at all," she gives him the role and the power of a priest ("he listened to her as calmly as a priest"), and she later turns his harshness into a self-punishment that excites her as much as the masochistic sex: "He spoke harshly: this was the drill sergeant, the voice of authority...This was the first wound he had dealt her, but how deep the sword went in!" (114, 115). She accepts his severity, and even expects more to follow--this was merely the first wound.

Although there are some references to Meg's enjoyment of inflicting emotional pain, particularly in the "Cruel and Barbarous Treatment," the monologue about Meg's deliberate withdrawal from her husband-to-be with the lover she is using, most of the time she is the recipient:

This was, she knew, the most profound, the most subtle, the most idyllic experience of her life. All the strings of her nature were, at last, vibrant. She was both doer and sufferer: she inflicted pain and participated in it. And she was, at the same time, physician, for, as she was the weapon that dealt the wound, she was also the balm that could assuage it. Only she could know the hurt that engrossed him, and it was to her that he turned for the sympathy she had ready for him. Finally, though she offered him his discharge slip with one hand, with the other she beckoned him to approach. (11-12)

Meg's sado-masochism is bested by Martha Sinnot of A Charmed Life. As much as he is vilified, her ex-husband, Miles Murphy, is the most interesting character besides Martha. Miles is so evil that he causes his very bright wives to be passive allowing his evil, and their own inner evil, to continue. Martha remembers that when she heard Miles' son, Barrett, cry from his father's beatings, "she had sometimes experienced pleasure," actually enjoying Miles' sadism (115). After Miles and Martha have sex, partly through his persuasive coercion, partly because Martha's own evil nature is excited, she discovers that she is pregnant, and chooses to have an abortion because "the hardest course was the right one... ." (262). But here she is deceiving herself, because the hardest choice for her would be to not know who the father was. She convinces herself that the abortion would both punish her, and help her reestablish a relationship with her husband, whom she is no longer loves.

This convoluted reasoning is exactly what McCarthy's does when she explains why she married Wilson:

So finally I agreed to marry him as my punishment for having gone to

bed with him...As a modern girl, I might not have called that a "sin"; I thought in logical rather than religious terms...I could not accept the fact that I had slept with this fat, puffing man for no reason, simply because I was drunk. No. It had to make sense. Marrying him, though against my inclinations, **made** it make sense. (IM 101)

McCarthy's heroines masochistically seek dictatorial men, and, as one critic puts it, "submit to a vague standard of values which seem to be measured by the pain or unattractiveness of the moral act" (Shinn 96). McCarthy, accepting criticism like Shinn's, responds that "American Catholicism has that sort of Calvinistic flavor" of self-examination and the belief that the difficult path is the moral path (Conversations 81). The self-criticism, the penance, the masochism of McCarthy's heroines, and the judgmental critic in McCarthy herself, come from McCarthy's Catholicism, a religion, although based on the concept, or ideology, of forgiveness, is transformed in reality to a patriarchal, punishing institution.

The Mind/Body Problem

Mary McCarthy touched a nerve with women, especially Catholic women, in at least the two decades following The Group. However, Mary Gordon's fiction might provide a prototype of a more successful heroine who attempts to reconcile the mind/body problem. This dualistic hostility toward the body, however, is still quite evident in Gordon's fiction. Gordon admits that as a child she slept with her mother while her father slept in his study: "but none of us admitted that" ("Houses" 43). So both at home and at Sunday School and at the Parochial school, the physical world is enveloped in silence: it was the intellectual world that mattered at home, the spiritual world at school. The dualistic division between mind, or soul, and body was attractive to Gordon, not only because of its simplicity, but also since she found more beauty in the mysteriousness of

the mind than the obvious presence of the body (Good Boys 161-2). Reared by her beloved father to be a Mary, not a Martha, a woman of intellectual and spiritual substance, rather than “just” a wife and mother, the beauty of the mind and soul became associated for Gordon, as it did for McCarthy, with the male, while the messiness of the body was relegated to the female: “I think we’ve always thought that anything not rooted in the flesh is the realm of men. So that if a woman had aspirations to be anything but rooted in flesh, she had to go to another man for it. And he would tell her what she was really like” (Good Boys 273).

The heroines of both writers seek father-like men who represent what seems to them to be the only path to the intellect, and allow them to be the good girls who get affirmation for their ability to think like men. When they do rebel, they rebel sexually, in order to punish either the men or that side of themselves that prefers the mind to the body. What happens for McCarthy’s heroines is that sex is unpleasurable; for Gordon’s, sex leads to unpleasurable events. This dichotomy between the sexes, the mind and the body, is seen in all of Gordon’s fiction. In The Company of Women, Elizabeth, Felicitas’ mother’s friend whose husband left her many years earlier, looks back at her long life, and expresses this split she still feels most acutely despite her age:

Jane Austen’s vision was not, she knew, deeply spiritual. The world of the spirit was cold and exalted; there was no furniture or conversation; no jokes or wordplay. The dark night of the spirit she dreaded as she dreaded walks on the cliffs whose drop was obvious. It was, she knew, her cowardice that made her wish she was Anne Elliot in Persuasion, visiting, doing good in ordinary corporal ways, obedient, grown pale with resignation and lost love. But where was God in that? And where was God in Mr. Bennet making fun of his poor stupid wife? (73)

In Final Payments, Isabel Moore has sex with her father's favorite student purposely, although of course she doesn't recognize it at the time, in her father's house. This is how to hurt her father the most, by succumbing to the pleasures of the flesh as he would have expected of most women, but not of his sainted Isabel. Afterwards, when Isabel fatalistically has sex with two inappropriate men--her best friend's husband, and then with another married man--she fights the self-induced guilt: Sex makes her feel like "someone at once vulnerable and out of control. What was it about sex that I was most ashamed of: the vulnerability it introduced, or the selfishness?" (141). Why vulnerable? There is in sex an intimacy that can't be avoided, as it can when one relates to another intellectually. Isabel agrees to a life of celibacy when her father has a stroke after catching her in bed with his student. Yet, she does not escape the physical at all; in her care for her father she must care for his body, and the care of a sick man confirms the lack of pleasure, mystery in the flesh. She describes the care for a dying man in much more detail in a later story than perhaps she was able to in Final Payments. In "Immaculate Man" the maintenance of life for the older priest, Boniface, is an exaggeration of the care required for the ordinary flesh:

All the equipment! The world of the permanently ill is a complete world, a real culture, with its own rules, its own standards, and perhaps above all its own artifacts. All the objects made of plastic, rubber, metal, held together with pins or screws or clamps or tape, to do what the body is meant to do by itself. Pulleys to do the work of the legs, tubes for eating, shitting, pissing...a nightmare image of the body, what we force ourselves to forget it is, a machine that keeps us (what do we mean by us?) alive.

It is no wonder that later Isabel thinks, "I was afraid I smelt bad, was afraid he could smell desire on me" (150).⁸

The idea that sexual pleasure, and the physical in general, is dangerous is also a direct result of her Irish-Catholic heritage which equates sex with sin, an idea perhaps only other Irish-Catholics can fully understand. Her friend Liz, portrayed as a strong, honest woman, admires Isabel's "masochistic" self sacrifice of Isabel for her father, yet notice how it is the female body particularly which obscures true spirituality:

With Eleanor and Liz you could talk about the danger of pleasure: St. Francis threw himself into a bed of roses to avoid looking at a beautiful woman; St. Thomas More wore a hair shirt because he was too fond of his wife. They had known what pleasure could lead to: putting yourself in the center of the universe, your own body blocking the vision of God like an eclipse, like the moon off its proper orbit. (204)

This distorted fear of being perceived selfish (as many critics see Isabel and Felicitas, ironically) and the resulting fear of losing the pleasure once it is gained, force Isabel to both seek the extremes of sexual freedom, and retreat into the extremes of self-denial: "I had been selfish. I could have devoured the world with my greed...And for this I had devised my own repentance" (223). Even when she does recognize that sleeping with John was a mistake, reminiscent of Mary McCarthy and Martha Sinnot, she allows him to have sex with her again: "Since I had wanted him once, he deserved me now" (144).

When Isabel belatedly takes care of her father's house after she has sold it, she reveals her fear that pleasure is precarious: "I could not love it until it was no longer mine" (99). Although she does not regret what she did for her father, the relief she feels, the

⁸ In a recent New York Times essay, Gordon reveals that her distaste for the physical also stems from her mother's life-long physical battle with the results of polio. ("My Mother is Speaking from the Desert." New York Times Magazine. 19 March 1995, Sec. 6, pp.44+).

acting out she must go through after years of virtual imprisonment, revive her guilt at possibly causing her father's stroke. She decides to take care of Margaret, the vulgar, unlovable woman who took care of her father and herself after her mother died (when Isabel was an infant), the woman Isabel despises. The twelve year old Isabel throws Margaret out of the house, with her father's tacit permission, in a scene that reveals the power and self-possession that she will eventually repress, yet even then she feared future punishment: "But in my triumph there was fear that such clever thefts are not, cannot be, permanently unpunishable" (27).

This fear of punishment is reinforced by the orthodox Catholic idea of the inevitability of human suffering on this earth as payment for Christ's sufferings for us. Part of her attraction to Hugh is her sadness, and she reacts with anger: "I realized that I was looking for someone who was sad, and I was angry at myself for making the equation, my father's equation, the Church's equation, between suffering and value" (117).⁹ Although Isabel recognizes how imbedded this connection of love and suffering is in her soul, she cannot release herself from it:

I was thinking of St. Paul on charity as I drank the coffee that Sally had ground herself. "Charity suffereth long and is kind," I was thinking. That was it, unless you were willing to suffer in your kindness, you were nothing...I carried the baggage of the idea. Love and charity...I remembered the lettering on a bulletin board at Anastasia Hall: LOVE IS MEASURED BY SACRIFICE. And I remembered thinking how wrong that was, because the minute I gave up something for someone, I liked them less. (145)

⁹ The Catholic philosopher Miguel de Unamuno defines suffering as part of what makes us human, "the divine blood that flows through us all" (205).

Although Isabel is in love with Hugh, who is willing to leave his wife, she feels compelled to return to Margaret "to obey what she sees as the stronger moral imperative, that of expiating her father's death by renouncing sensuality and joy in her own life" (Booth 427). But she twists the Church's definition of charity, and she deceives herself. It is not Margaret she cares for; she is seeking absolution from stealing Hugh from his wife, and her father from Margaret. She has taken the hostility to the body, and the Church's call for charity, too far, and this supposed act of charity is effectively more selfish than any physical pleasure, and more destructive.

The charity she originally gives to Margaret--basically her life--is really her need to deny the flesh, and find shelter, once again, in celibacy. The Good Friday mass dedicated to the death of Christ, and Father Mulcahy's reinterpretation of the scriptures, help her recognize the twisted nature of her abnegation of the flesh: the death of Christ's body is important to God and the commandment, "Thou shall not kill" is a protection of the body. Father Mulcahy, the alcoholic priest, cares for food, music and fashion, and he tells Isabel that God also cares for the physical. He says to the depressed, overweight Isabel, who had recently cut off her hair as part of her penance:

"Well, then, watch your weight, honey. God gave you beauty. If you waste it, that's a sin against the fifth commandment."

"Thou shall not kill? What does that have to do with it?"

"It means slow deaths, too," he said. (242)

Isabel revisions the Catholic notion of charity into a more Protestant notion, and what many critics misperceive as a selfish notion, of charity: instead of giving away her "self" she gives of herself, signing over to Margaret the money she inherited from her father.

The recognition that God *does* love the body and flesh, despite the Church's attempt to vilify them, is taken further in her later fiction. Felicitas comes of age in the

1960s and 70s, a time when spirituality was celebrated, at least in the secular world, with the physical. Father Cyprian's "intellectually wrathful pedagogy" (Morey 1060) cannot prepare her for the conflict between her desire to remain spiritually pure and her desire for physical pleasure. In preparation for sleeping with Robert, she spends all her savings on lingerie forcing her to skip on food: "That pleased her, knowing that the gown would cost her something more than money. Now she would be able to associate the sense of love with the sense of hunger, which was, she thought, the proper combination" (115).

Like Isabel, she has a distorted sense that love is connected to suffering.

It is once again through Jesus, this time his incarnation into flesh, that allows Felicitas to recognize the dangers of living without the pleasure of the body. Part of the reason she marries Leo is that a sexual life will humanize her, unlike the single women she sees, namely Muriel, another Margaret/Aunt Clara character, who represses her sexuality with Cyp's selfish encouragement: "I don't want that for Linda. I had Cyprian, but he fathered me as if we were both bodiless, for our connection had nothing in it of the flesh" (251). Even the dying Cyp recognizes that his hatred of women was connected to his hatred of the flesh.

It is the nun who is the honored member of Gordon's own family, not the famous novelist. "They all thought my books were dirty." Gordon has often tried to analyze the puritanical streak in her writing, (which her relatives missed), and in Irish Catholics in general:

Irish Catholicism is very anti-sexual, and the sexy people get out of the church, they have to. What you're left with is a marvelous ascetic type who stays in the church, or a person like Flannery O'Connor who's a virgin through and through, one of those wise and fierce Antigone. They can stay and be quite interesting and quite admirable, but the sexual people have to get out. (Cooper-Clark 271)

And Mary Gordon is one of the "sexual people" despite the lurking sexual puritanism in her writings. In her fiction, Gordon attempts to portray heroines who are not solely defined by their sexuality; their sexual lives are deliberately intertwined with their lives as daughters, wives, lovers, or mothers. Rejecting the Church's dichotomy of women as either virgin or whore, Gordon creates heroines whose sexuality is either apparent or lurking beneath the surface at all times. When asked to discuss her the heroines in The Rest of Life, Gordon responded,

But a woman doesn't stop being a mother and a daughter when she is a lover. I was interested in portraying that a sexual life for a woman isn't necessarily compartmentalized; it flows in and out of the other kinds of a woman that she is--a worker, a lover, a mother, a daughter, a friend--all those dimensions are woven into one another.

(qtd. in Samway 14)

Mary Gordon's Feminist Heroines and

Mary McCarthy's Angels of Self-Sacrifice

Isabel Moore's anger and frustration, after turning inward, eventually lead to her acceptance of the messiness of the body, the loneliness and freedom of the secular world, rather than the sense of community, the censure and rigidity of the Church. She is able to leave Margaret, her father, and her guilt behind, redefine the Catholic notion of charity as self-abnegation, and let herself love Hugh, avoiding, what Rachel Brownstein warns is the desire for closure, the "seductive idea of the heroine" (xx). Isabel and Felicitas both slowly and painfully realize that they must reject the repressiveness, and thus lose the security of the Church in order to live the lives they choose. They must break free from their respective cloistered environments. Yet they cannot totally dismiss the Church, a powerful influence, early embedded in them. Gordon, in her first two novels as well as

in her interviews, admits her nostalgia for the traditional, pre-Vatican II Church. She obviously admires her character Father Cyprian of The Company of Women, who cuts a compelling, powerful, yet misogynistic, figure as a rebel priest, fighting against the updated Church, creating, in Felicitas, a woman, in **his** image, who he hopes will save the traditional ways. The Catholic symbolism that surrounds Felicitas forms an image of a Christ-like redeemer. Felicitas, like all Gordon's Catholic women heroines, is passionate, strong-willed, ultimately insightful. And the community of women, including Father Cyprian, chooses her to be their savior: "Father Cyprian had been amazed by her questions. At twelve she had a better mind than most priests"; Charlotte "could see Felicitas only among elders, the child in the temple, amazing the scribes with learning" (DuPlessix 24).

At the end of the novel, although Felicitas is no longer religious, she replaces Cyprian as the "mind" of the community of women; and Cyprian changes, finally admitting that the women are the backbone of both the Church and his life. This allows Gordon to keep the traditional Church--its elegance, its language, its strictness--yet demasculinize it, putting a woman's touch to it so to speak, so that it no longer offends her feminist sensibilities: "Felicitas marries in the cool pragmatic spirit of a female warrior or priestess choosing a more comfortable government for her acolytes" (DuPlessix 24). The Church is thus feminized and brought down to earth, breaking away from Cyprian's patriarchal Catholicism. The community of women that still exists at the end of the novel becomes a feminist duplication of the security of the Church with its acceptance of human, womanly love that Cyprian fought against. Admittedly, this change is still not ideal as Felicitas feels the need to marry a man she does not love, and the community looks toward a doubtful Linda to be the new, and improved, generation. But it is a change toward the better.

In The Other Side, Cam MacNamara is on the brink of realizing that she will drown if she continues to live in her mother's house. She must give up the relatively easy

and safe decision of staying there to care for her mother whom she does not adore yet who needs her daughter's admiration, not care. She stays married to her kind, but dull husband, who lives in the basement. Cam married him because he was kind to her, and when their sex life is destroyed by the Catholic doctor's inability to diagnose endometriosis, they separate from each other, each unwilling to follow through with a divorce. All of Gordon's characters have to take on the much more difficult responsibility of adult decision making, and leave the dualistic moral world of good and bad acts, guilt and punishment, behind. The adult world is one where there are multiple truths depending on the context of the moral situation, truths that they have the power to create, rather than the dualistic faith in the absolutes of good and evil.

Of course, Gordon's heroines must first overcome the idea that they've been permanently formed by their orthodox upbringing. Catholic writers from Flannery O'Connor to Andrew Greeley see the church as providing, according to O'Connor, a "visible symbol of order...particularly in the context of modern disorder" (qtd. in Good Boys 42). The problem with this, as O'Connor herself recognized but did not have to deal with, is how do you adjust to the disorder of the modern world if you are no longer part of the order? This is the theme of Gordon's fiction, one of which she attempted to answer with help from a feminist awareness that complements, not replaces, her Catholic moral sensibility. Isabel reinterprets Jesus' words from abstractions to concrete words of love; Felicitas finds comfort away from the absolutist men, Cyp and Robert, with the caring, comforting circle of women. All her heroines, however tentatively, resist closure, "the delusion of a passive life" as Carolyn Heilbrun defines it, by not returning completely to the security and limitations of their childhoods.

McCarthy's characters, as we know, do not fare as well. Meg Sargent desperately tries to gain self-autonomy, to take herself away from the comforts and demands of authority, personified in the Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt. Yet, in doing so, she falls back on abstractions, rather than taking responsibility for her own

actions and inactions: the seduction is abstracted into a political or class war, the bourgeois versus the bohemian, while the safety pin holding together her underwear, no longer embarrasses her as it did at first, but becomes a symbol of her “moral fastidiousness” (117). Martha Sinnot also retreats to the dogmatic, non-contextual response to a moral dilemma, one which sees the world in the polarities of sin and punishment, good and evil, and a moral position that is ultimately destructive; as she allows herself to recognize at the beginning of the novel, she does not have a charmed life. According to Thelma Shinn: “Miles has again enabled Martha to feel evil so that she can feel good about herself when she makes the grand sacrifice. Deciding to punish herself by having the abortion...she admires her internal “lawgiver” and is in awe of her own integrity” (95-6). Neither Meg nor Martha accepts the responsibility for sex, believing that the men have misunderstood or misread them (Meg did not want to have sex with Mr. Breen, nor did Martha with Miles, they were just drunk and depressed), and neither, ironically, do they get any pleasure from the sex they do have. Both women punish themselves afterwards--Meg has sex again and agrees to see him again, while Martha has the abortion--yet neither feel absolved. The punishment is simply not enough.

In fact, many of her heroines act childishly, rejecting personal responsibility, like the young McCarthy in Memories of a Catholic Girlhood, who, when faced with a moral dilemma, equivocated, unable to disappoint those who she thought saw her as a good girl, seeing both sides, yet unable to choose. Meg sees her life as a reworking, without relief, of her childhood and Catholic heritage, yet does not see that she can break the pattern. She wants the protection of a father-figure like Mr. Breen and Frederick, though when she has them, she rebels childishly, trashing the choices they made for themselves, rather than accepting the fact that she also chose them, however wrongly. On some level she recognizes this: each chapter shows her taking on different roles, divorcee, career girl, bohemian, Trotskyist, intellectual, analyst, in an attempt to find out what she really is now that her role as good Catholic daughter is gone; sadly, it does not occur to her to

invent her own existence rather than adopt a false one. Her only hope is her realization that she has failed to love herself:

[She hoped] to love herself through them, borrowing their feelings, as the moon borrowed the light. She herself was a dead planet...the equivocal personality who was not truly protean but only appeared so. And yet, she thought, walking on, she could still detect her own frauds.

(303)

Martha's response to Miles is equally childish: she even sees herself as "an open-minded child who listens unsuspectingly to what is told him." The reader learns that her desire to have a child with John is in some ways a rebellion against Miles, who gave her no child. Kay and John's marriage in The Group is a childish, childless coupling between two people playing house, and in "The Weeds," the heroine childishly runs away from her husband to a hotel, stays there unable to move for a week, until he comes to bring her home. The McCarthy heroine both hates and seeks these controlling men, who will tell them who they are and what to do, thus relieving themselves of responsibility, and positioning themselves, always, as the martyred one, a rather horrid position for those who have to live with a martyr as well as for the woman herself. If, as Dr. James and Meg discover with horror, the life we led as a child haunts us as adults, then we get what Podhoretz humorously defines as the "Mary McCarthy heroine: a high-minded adult under the tyranny of a five-year-old-brat" ("Gibbsville" 272).

Another critic, Bruce Cook, writing for a conservative Catholic journal, extends the metaphor of the child within the adult beyond her heroines to McCarthy herself. He sees Memories of a Catholic Girlhood as an attack on her Grandmother Preston, her Uncle Myers, all the adults of her childhood who failed her: "She has kept alive the twelve-year-old's romantic notions of love and her fear of sex, the scrupulous interest in motivation

with its attendant casuistry and passion for analysis...All schoolgirls are Jansenists; some, however, do grow out of it" (41). Yet what Cook fails to see in his attack on McCarthy is that, like her heroines, she was a product of her own time, a time when girls, especially bright girls, were encouraged to look toward men for authority, to please all adults, and to put their own needs on hold. The reason for McCarthy's passive heroines may simply be her way of destroying the selves that she had adopted in the past, allowing her, in her own life, to move on.

Mary Gordon's heroines more successfully cast off their childish dependence on men and dualism. Gordon believes that the precepts of Catholicism, "spirituality, strict interpretation of law, belief in reason at the expense of instinct, the application of truth on universal levels, and belief in retributive punishment--all stem from traditional male values" (Ward 306). As a writer, she has chosen for her subject the evolution of the young Catholic girl or woman, who must break away from her religious conditioning in order to recognize it, in order to choose which aspects of it are relevant to her life as a late twentieth-century woman. In keeping with much feminist theology, she distinguishes between the institutional church as "masculine" as opposed to the actual scriptures where a reinterpretation of Jesus' words would support a more "feminine" generalization. And Gordon's conclusion, what many critics miss, is that neither extreme alone is sufficient for a fully integrated, adult life.

This is most apparent when Gordon writes about the complexities of physical and individual love in the secular world, as opposed to the spiritual and universal love proposed by the Church, the old split between eros and agape. McCarthy's heroines don't get to the point of worrying about love, because they, as we saw with Meg and Martha, are too needy, too eager to please. Likewise, when Gordon's heroines are out into the randomness of the world, they temporarily retreat to the comfort of the absolute, where one was loved and loved impartially, without vulnerability, "impervious to their individual natures and thus incapable of being hurt by them" (FP 212). Gordon's

heroines realize that not everyone is lovable, thus the goal of "caritas" or charity, while admirable and good, is not feasible or enough in the secular world without risk of losing one's autonomous self and missing out on human love. Felicitas describes her epiphany: "And tears came to my eyes for the hopefulness, the sweetness, the enduring promise of plain human love. And I understood the incarnation for, I believe, the first time: Christ took on flesh for love, because the flesh is lovable" (270).

The Ethics of Care and Justice

The dichotomy between the orthodox church and the Gordon heroine, or male and female moral systems, reflects Carol Gilligan's thesis that men and women perceive the world differently, and that the women's viewpoint has been undervalued, leading to low self-esteem in women. With her famous study, In A Different Voice, Gilligan attempted to correct Lawrence Kohlberg's study on morality which found women morally immature because he measured their morality on a scale derived from men. However it is Kohlberg's systematized moral growth chart that eerily echoes the development of a McCarthy/Gordon Irish-Catholic heroine: Stage 1. Deferring to authority; 2. Learning to satisfy one's own needs and begin to consider the needs of others; 3. Seek others' approval by conforming to stereotypical roles; 4. Obtaining a sense of the value of maintaining the social order; 5. Begin to associate morality with rights and standards endorsed by society; 6. Think in terms of the chosen self, and follow universal principles of justice (Kittay 6).

Kohlberg tested his theory by asking both boys and girls to respond to Heinz's drug dilemma in which Heinz's wife is dying and he cannot afford to buy the medicine that will cure her. What should he do? Should he steal the drug? According to Kohlberg, Jake said to steal the drug from the druggist and then explain to the judge why it was the right and necessary thing to do. Amy said that she would appeal to the druggist and hope that he would understand that the wife needed the drug; if not, she might steal the drug, and hope that the judge understands that the wife needs the drug. Jake's decision was

seen by Kohlberg to be more morally mature than Amy's equivocation. The difference between the two responses, according to Gilligan, is a difference between the morality of rights and justice versus the morality of care and responsibility. She acknowledges that although the care response was not apparent for all the women she tested, it was almost exclusively an educated, North American, female response--a category that includes both writers under discussion.

She differentiates between the ethics of care and justice by seeing the latter as a response to the question of "What is just?" and the former to "How should I respond?" Amy's response to Heinz's Dilemma reflects her need to see all those involved as a "network of relationships on whose continuation they all depend" (Gilligan 30). Unlike Jake, she hesitates in her response because she only sees a choice between two evils: sacrifice (Heinz stealing the drug and going to jail) or selfishness (Heinz not stealing the drug, and letting his wife die). Unlike Kohlberg, Gilligan recognizes the maturity in Amy's reluctance to make a decision because Amy is aware that any judgment affects everyone involved. In other words, women make moral decisions that keep relationships (think of Martha's decision to have an abortion to save her dying marriage) rather than a deductive use of general principles (yet Martha claims to be following a moral principle of sin and punishment, which ultimately destroys her).

Gilligan believes that the ethic of care is just as mature as the ethic of justice; and like Kohlberg's chart of moral development based on the ethic of justice, she has created one based on the ethic of care. Gilligan believes that the shifts from one stage to the next are precipitated by a personal crisis which forces one to either move up or return to those missed growth opportunities. For example, for Isabel, the death of her father leads to the forced autonomy, a stage she should have gone through ten years earlier; for Meg, it is her marriage to Frederick that provides the crisis; Felicitas's and Martha's pregnancies also force them to make moral decisions. Think of these characters as I go through Gilligan's process (a better word than stages) of moral development. She believes there are six

stages marked by three levels of development: *Preconventional level*: Stage 1. Individual survival, caring for the self; 2. Transition away from self-centeredness to responsibility. *Conventional Level*: Stage 3. Focus is on care and conformity, desire to please others; 4. Tendency toward self-sacrifice evolves into a transition from “goodness” to “truth” as well as a greater equality between self and other. *Post Conventional Level*:: Stage 5. Morality involves the dynamics of relationships; 6. Tension between self and others dissipates, and care becomes a self-chosen principle with the recognition of the interdependence of self and other. (Gilligan 7).

The differences between Kohlberg and Gilligan are most apparent in the later stages, when instead of following universal principles the ethic of care recognizes interrelationships and contexts.

Many post-Gilligan critics have recognized that the justice perspective often appears as the ideology of a dominant class and thus considered universal (Kittay 13). The justice perspective is also apparent in the orthodox Catholicism as portrayed in Gordon’s fiction, where the male characters, such as Professor Moore, Hugh, Father Cyprian, Robert, even Michael Foster (of Men and Angels), represent the justice perspective in its various stages. The heroines of both Gordon and McCarthy, from Meg and Martha, to Isabel, Felicitas and Anne, all represent various stages of the ethic of care position, although they consciously adopt a Catholic ethic of justice: it is when they choose an extreme justice (usually McCarthy’s heroines) or care (often Gordon’s heroines) position, however, that they get into trouble. Gilligan has noted that the morality of care is best voiced through narratives which are necessary to understand the relationships between people so that a moral decision can be made. McCarthy and Gordon’s fiction can be seen as struggling with these moral perspectives.

In her study, Gilligan contrasts a passage from Memories of a Catholic Girlhood with Joyce’s A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man because each represents the female and male perspectives. When the young McCarthy was confronted with a moral decision,

specifically whether or not to lie about being out with a boy on school grounds--if she lies, she can graduate-- she lies: "I was going to equivocate, not for selfish reasons but in the interests of the community, like a grown-up responsible person" (162). Stephen Dedalus, Joyce's persona, when faced with a moral decision, chooses not to compromise by lying: "I will not serve that in which I no longer believe... ." For Stephen, leaving childhood means renouncing relationships to protect his own freedom of self-expression; for Mary, it means giving up freedom of self-expression in order to preserve relationships, and in this case, do what everyone expected her to do--lie. This illustrates Gilligan's thesis that men tend to operate from the direction of separation, while women tend to choose connection.

The Catholic Church is responsible for gendering its theology, where women are associated with nurturance, care, self-sacrifice and sexuality, and men are associated with spirituality, charity, ritual, law and celibacy. The male values are generally more privileged than the female, and, according to Gilligan, her women students preferred Stephen's "braver" response, than Mary's response. But both were responding to an Irish-Catholic background. McCarthy spent her life trying to make up for these moments of compromise in her childhood; instead of even politely equivocating, the adult McCarthy is famed for her brutal honesty to herself and others. As an adult she had little trouble breaking relationships with men, and then mocking them, and herself, in her fiction. In reaction to her childhood, and later adult, self-sacrifices, McCarthy became the absolutist, always aware of any violations in honesty, relationships be damned. The question of whether or not McCarthy's response is weaker than Dedalus', whether it is too much like self-sacrifice rather than care, is one that Gordon also struggles with in her fiction.

According to Mary Gordon, women are raised to view the world differently than men: "Women are trained to be more associative and they're trained to be more interested in human relations, so that's what they are going to write about in their novels" (Cooper-

Clark, 273). Isabel and Felicitas were raised with orthodox male values which devalued the feminine (both were raised as spiritual Marys, not domestic Marthas, by strong men who treated them as sons). Anne Foster, too, was her father's favorite, and learned through him to value the justice perspective in Michael, her husband. At the end of all three novels, the heroines discover the value in both perspectives, as well as the extremes of both which must be avoided.

Final Payments' Professor Moore lived in the abstract, to such a degree that "[h]e would often talk about the happiness of people in the slums, although he had never visited one and he ignored the struggle of his own family against poverty, a struggle that ended in his mother's madness" (10) Felicitas' Robert, like Professor Moore, idealizes the poor, not recognizing the fact that the poor would kill to be him. And Anne Foster depends on and admires her husband's moral perspective, although it is not nearly as destructive as Robert's and Moore's: "Michael valued reason more than she did, and that justice in their lives was so real and valuable, solid and living to him, as it was vague, impalpable, to her. His justice had helped them again and again" (133).

The problem is that because justice is valued, the ethic of care is denigrated, whether or not it involves destructive self-sacrifice:

It is so easy for men with the kind of mind Cyprian has to make a woman look foolish: the sage as fire in whose flame must burn the fat female mind. My mind is better, more complicated, more responsible than his, but he can, in a minute, make it look childish and uninformed. Our minds can meet only in play. (CW 255)

Although she recognizes her ability to see both perspectives simultaneously, Felicitas is still seen as childish by Cyp's childishly absolutist mind. In Final Payments, Isabel's rebellion from her father's ethic of justice is also done with the recognition that she is

choosing an ethic of care despite what he tried to teach her. In her role as social worker, Isabel visits Sally, who is caring for two elderly people only for the money. The older people, however, don't miss her love, and are happy where they are, but Sally agonizes over it. Isabel realizes that Sally's goodness to them does not make her happy, that in the secular world, "goodness was a private, esoteric hobby" no longer valuable in itself. Because of this realization that the value of goodness as self-sacrifice that she was raised with is no longer valid, she gives Sally a good report, and thinks, "if I were my father I would have written a bad report to make happen what I knew to be right" (149) which is taking the old people away from Sally. Isabel is no longer relying on absolutes to make her moral decisions, although, as we know, she retreats as the responsibility grows.

The potential problems with following a strict ethic of justice are many. Most of the men and women like Isabel's Margaret, and by extension the Church, are stuck at an immature ethic of justice that makes life easier. Gordon uses the word "childish" often in her fiction to label those who childishly depend on the Church, or rely on absolutes. The elderly Margaret still has the "childish" way of heading her letters with "Through Jesus to Mary" and the symbol of the cross as if she has not outgrown this parochial school habit. Professor Moore is like a child "who dies before the age of reason" relying still on the childish orthodoxy: "His mind had the brutality of a child's or an angel's: the finger of the angel points in the direction of hell, sure of the justice of the destination of the souls he transports" (10). Isabel continues with the connection between absolute faith and childishness: "Both Father Mulcahy and my father were children, and their love made the exhausting demands of a child's. Perhaps it was because they were used to loving God, Who found nothing exhausting" (60).

Isabel recognizes that she was entombed in childhood during the last years with her father when all she did was eat and sleep, and later she acts childishly when Hugh tries to get her to reach the mountain's summit in time for the sunrise. When she lunches with Lavinia, who is defined in opposition through her Protestantism, Isabel looks up to her

for guidance as if her non-Catholic background made her more adult; she thinks Lavinia will tell her who she is, especially now that her father, the man who used to define her, is dead. And at the end of the novel, she retreats again to food and sleep, and the absolute meaning of charity without individual love, with its safety from loss and real human connection. It is only her recognition that Jesus' words reflect an ethic of care, not an ethic of justice, that she is able to leave Margaret's house: "The poor you have always with you." She recognizes, again, but this time with more power, that she should not refuse to love "the ones we loved in favor of the anonymous poor" and that she can still help Margaret without expecting love in return. Importantly, it is the words from the scriptures that allow Isabel to truly see this, although Isabel learns this several times previous to her epiphany at Margaret's.

The web of relationships is a vivid metaphor for the ethic of care, because like webs, relationships are fragile, requiring a faith in the other person that is more difficult to sustain than a faith in God, no matter what strengths and values we invest the person with. Faith in a person is tested in ways that faith in God is not, and the chances of betrayal are multiplied. There is a delicate balance required rather than the relatively more stable hierarchy, and instead of constructing a structure or law to impose order over chaos, the dialectic approach seeks a more consensual, even temporal, sense of order, recognizing that not all the chaos can be controlled.

It is necessary that the different ethical perspectives must interact with each other in order to provide a balance. Too much reliance on the ethic of justice and you become dogmatic, relying on a simplistic and out of context sense of right and wrong; too much ethic of care can lead to a loss of self rather than a more freely chosen altruism that recognizes need for self-respect and determination. With Isabel, we see what can happen when the ethic of care is taken to an extreme: her selflessness in returning to care for Margaret becomes her selfish inability to face up to the adult choices required of her. She distorts the Catholic concepts of charity and goodness. Instead of trying to be good, she is

demanding attention and release from responsibility. As one writer put it, the two perspectives must support each other mutually. For example, when a parent says to a child, “Kate, look how sad David is; he deserves a turn, too” (Flanagan 50).

Hugh calls Isabel a coward for regressing to the simple Catholic role, though now distorted, of good girl. McCarthy eventually saw her own equivocation as cowardly. But Isabel, unlike McCarthy and her heroines, instead of angrily adopting an ethic of justice, or retreating from all decisions into acts of self-sacrifice, is able to revise herself with the help of a feminist consciousness, not the strict feminist ideology critics accuse Gordon of using to replace orthodox Catholicism. Her feminism is tempered by a rereading of the scriptures, particularly St. Mark.

The Jesus she now sees is not as meek and mild as she remembers, he gets angry and violent, overturning tables in the temple. But in her essay on the Gospel of St. Mark she sees Him interact with women as equals, impressed with a menstruating woman’s faith, a Gentile woman’s ideas. Ranke-Heinemann notes that in St. Luke’s chapter, Jesus is also portrayed as a friend of women:

We all know [Jesus] had twelve male disciples, but he also had many female disciples, including society ladies such as Joanna [who financially supported him]...These women gathered around Jesus, his female disciples, were not a passive audience. Women were the first to announce the resurrection of Jesus. Luke (24:10) says, “Now it was Mary Magdalene Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women who told this to the apostles.” This was not merely private information but a public announcement, since the Greek word for “told” (*apaggellein*) has an official character. (120)

McCarthy's characters, however, never learn to integrate their divided selves, the result of their divided moral perspectives. Meg and Martha, as well as the girls from The Group, all represent the justice perspective, the fairy princess, the victim, the martyr. It is not that Gordon has discovered something that McCarthy has not. Meg Sargent is the only McCarthy heroine who resists closure, whereas all of Gordon's novels are open-ended, and, as we see in Men and Angels and The Other Side, even if the heroines have been able to begin integrating, the next generation will have to go through the same process again: at the end of the first novel, Anne's secular children, appropriately named after two doubting Biblical figures, Peter and Sarah, search for religious language for the first time, while Ellen's granddaughters Darci and Staci continue to see the adult world in terms of absolutes.

The Feminist Influence

There is a feminist consciousness in Gordon's fiction, not apparent in McCarthy's, that allows her heroines the chance to transcend the restrictive influence of an Irish-Catholic heritage. In Gordon's fiction there is a strong sense of a community of women. In one of her interviews, Gordon said that she was raised in a very orthodox Catholicism, and she was "brought up in a very female-centric world" since her father died when she was a young girl (Cooper-Clark 272). It is not surprising that the women in her early novels find salvation in other women and not the Church. The communities of women comfort each other, offering a security that is better than that offered by men because it is not a security **from** danger (Felicitas sees all men as potentially dangerous to women--both physically and emotionally, and that "[t]his is the source of our desire for obedience...It is for shelter that we marry and make love" (Company 253)), but a security **to** feel self-possessed. In The Company of Women, "Charlotte magically opened the circle in which all these years she had been warmed and fed and bolstered" (11). Women's friendships are more important in these novels than the sexual bond: Final Payments ends with Isabel

between her two friends who have put aside their differences to help her: Liz, Isabel and Eleanor hold hands as they leave Margaret's house as well as the self-destructiveness of Catholic charity as self-sacrifice, together.

This is the younger generation. The older women, however, particularly in The Company of Women, are unable to reject or reinterpret the Church and the hierarchical standards they have come to respect. These women do not want to change the structure they love--one leader controlling the flock--but to duplicate it in the home:

All of them had been through the death of their mothers, these women to whom mothers were of primary importance. They sat and waited, children born in America of women who had risked everything to get here, women who saw their daughters self-supporting and mistrusted it, because their only real respect was for women who ruled large houses. (Company 253)

These women distrust groups that are not based on Catholic values. The Church is a powerful and cohesive force that is not easily given up, and the rituals and laws bind its members together. Gordon herself admires the cohesion of the Church, and the women who hold it together: "And the thing about the Church which is why it's so resonant is that it does seem there is an essential core that seems to last and to go on, to retain its language, to retain its ritual, to retain what I like to think are some central values that are immutable" (Schreiber 26).

On the other hand, there is also an acknowledged hostility perhaps toward the complicity of mothers in perpetuating destructive values. Isabel's mother is dead and her paternal grandmother goes mad. The only mother figure in her life is the despicable Margaret, whose influence is negative. She dislikes girls who are close to their mothers, and at one point says, "the idea that I was hated by women made everything incalculably

more menacing" (28). The maternal instincts of Father Mulcahy, and her friendship with Liz and Eleanor, replace the loss of her mother. Men and Angels examines the role of mother in the modern, post-feminist world: how can one be both a mother and an artist? How are some mothers good and some bad. Anne Foster, like Isabel, is her father's daughter, and like her younger counterpart, she relies on Jane and even the dead artist Caroline whom she is investigating, to provide her the mother love she did not receive. Yet it is because of her own lack of mother love that she is unable to offer Laura the mother love that she didn't get. In The Other Side almost all the mothers are somehow defective. But it is really the story of the impact one mother has on several generations of mothers. Ellen, the matriarch, who was loved by a mother who is eventually destroyed by a series of miscarriages, is so angry that she takes it out on her daughters who, in turn, take it out on their daughters.

Finally, in The Rest of Life, all three narrators rebel from the obligations and rules imposed by their mothers, or mother figures, rules invented to create borders from the disorder of life. All the mothers are dead or dying. The first narrator's mother, now dead, could not deal with her daughter's messy divorce and work with abused women; the second mother is dying, but while well, she was a slave to the constant care of her old, dark, dusty furniture. The third mother died young, but was replaced by an aunt who rivals Margaret in Final Payments: "Her aunt was eaten up by law. By the spite which the law bred . . . Her aunt's sallow skin. The circles underneath her eyes. Her feet in their little boots. Her fingers, knitting. In her aunt's eyes: "I know everything you are. I know what you will become." Women like this aunt, Meg's Aunt Clara, Isabel's Margaret, and Felicitas' Muriel are warnings for the heroines of what identity to avoid. All of these women submit to the patriarchal norm, either the father's ethic of justice, or the Church's hostility toward women. These "Aunts" like the Aunts of Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale who teach women to submit to the authorities for their own protection and the good of the country's future, provide an escape for the heroines

because they offer what Erik Erikson (1968) called “negative identities,” or a definition of self based on the opposition to their identity. Isabel says of Margaret:

Her reading the *Sacred Heart Messenger* allowed me to read Mary McCarthy...I invented myself in her image, as her opposite. It was immensely helpful. Without her, I would have had to invent myself entirely. An exhausting process with the charm, perhaps, of originality, but with very little prospect of real quality. (29)

Like Sylvia Plath’s Esther Greenwood deciding which fig to pick, Isabel fears the responsibility of choice: “The day seemed excessively open...life was space, the borders seemed so far away from the airy center that there was no help... .”(38). The Church provided the borders, and restricted the “sickening expanse of potential” (59). Creating one’s own life involves risk, and loss of approval from what was once the sanctuary. Cam MacNamara thinks of her Aunt Theresa, the ex-nun: “She can know who she is in the world if she is somebody’s antagonist; to be Theresa’s enemy, therefore **not Theresa** in the world, satisfies her, gives her certainty and hope” (158). And in “The Rest of Life,” Paola keeps her anger at her aunt kindled because “giving up that grain of sand, that dark irritation around which she formed her idea of who she was. **I am not her**” (220).

In The Group, McCarthy’s most female novel, radical politics is intertwined with sexual and personal liberation. McCarthy was ahead of her times: she recognized that the personal was political years before the Women’s Liberation Movement of the 1970s. In his memoirs, William Barrett, fellow-Partisan Review-er, writes of McCarthy’s first novel: “We did not know it then, but she was in fact firing the first salvo in the feminist war that now rages within our society, though I doubt that the movement has since produced any weapon of equal class and caliber” (67). In fact, many male critics, and only some female critics, admire McCarthy and declare her a women extraordinaire; if

anything, even after her death she succeeds in attracting the admiration of intelligent men. In 1993, John Crowley called her first novel “a pioneering work of feminist fiction” (112). And she wowed Joseph Epstein, also in 1993, although like Barrett, he puts her on a pedestal: “Like most talented women, Mary McCarthy was no feminist, either when young or in her later years. She felt feminism ‘bad for a woman,’ for she thought it born of desperation and that ‘it induces a bad emotional state.’” (43)¹⁰ McCarthy continues by saying that feminism is “a competitive ideology born of desperation,” though she admitted that, “I’m sort of Uncle Tom from this point of view” (qtd. in Brightman 343). She knows that the successes she had in life were because of men, an acknowledgment that no feminist would make today: as Philip Rahv’s girlfriend, she got to write for the Partisan Review, (though William Barrett denies this), through Edmund Wilson, she started writing fiction, and Broadwater took care of life for her while she continued to write: “[H]e fixed the leaky faucets, deployed the hated vacuum cleaner, screened the calls and callers, restored one house, caretook another, and remained throughout a steadfast companion to Reuel” (Brightman in Mirabella 142).

McCarthy writes about the problems intellectual and political women had in the Thirties; although the groups on the Left were concerned with worker's rights, poverty and social conditions, the rights of women and other minorities were ignored or subsumed by this focus. The women activists of the Teens and Twenties were replaced by the social activists of the Thirties. Yet feminists do not often claim her, and McCarthy often expressed her opposition to feminism. It is unfortunate that feminism’s spokeswoman, Simone de Beauvoir, was her archrival. Brightman recorded this comment: “‘How **dare** she talk about injustice to women and how as a woman she’s been deprived when she has put herself on the map solely by attaching herself to Sartre, **solely**. **Sartre et moi**. He **made** her,’ McCarthy declared” (qtd. in Mirabella 143).

¹⁰ He also believed that her beauty helped her in her quest for fame.

In a 1963 interview with Jack Paar, McCarthy denied that The Group contained any feminist content. She continued to say that having lived in Paris for two years, she now finds American women too aggressive, and talkative (as she chatted away flirtatiously with the host), and that she prefers women who are professional yet who still defer to men. Finally, she said that men are more sensitive than women and that women, although they have a quick intelligence, are very manipulative.

As she got older, she got progressively more hostile toward feminism; in a 1979 interview with Miriam Gross she firmly states:

As for Women's Lib, it bores me. Of course I believe in equal pay and equality before the law and so on, but this whole myth about how different the world would have been if it had been female dominated... I've never noticed that women were less warlike than men. And in marriage--an equal division of tasks is impossible--it's a judgment of Solomon. (Conversations 176)

It is not surprising that McCarthy would reject any philosophy that went against her sense of reality: McCarthy herself was never considered less of an aggressive, or warlike, critic and satirist than any man. Yet McCarthy was often called "bitch" and other feminine pejorative names because she was able to ignore Virginia Woolf's angel of the house. Brightman believes that McCarthy actually liked being a woman, particularly because of the skills a woman has to learn such as getting her own way "without direct confrontation--which are the gifts of observation and analysis" (Brightman 343). Her life and her fiction, however, are not the same, and maybe we should not expect them to be. The girls of The Group compete with each other for who gets the best life, the best man, and their juggling of allegiances at Vassar was merely a precursor to their lives; their "friendship" is superficial. Carolyn Heilbrun dismisses McCarthy because in her fiction

(except The Group) and her life (except Hannah Arendt), there are no female friendships, but in How I Grew McCarthy wrote that “[i]n the course of history, not love or marriage so much as friendship has promoted [intellectual] growth” (28). Of course this does leave out emotional growth, where the McCarthy heroine is at her weakest.

Despite herself, there are some feminists who do admire her. Martha Duffy wrote that she inspired generations of women because she wrote about “a woman’s domestic strategies, her finances, her female friendships, her minute biological concerns. Every syllabus on feminist literature is indebted to her... .” (87). Alison Lurie, a novelist often compared with both Gordon and McCarthy for her moral sensibility and literary style, looked to McCarthy’s life, not her fiction, for advice:

Before Mary McCarthy, if an educated girl did not simply abdicate all intellectual ambitions and agree to dwindle into a housewife, there seemed to be only two possible roles she could choose: the Wise Virgin and the Romantic Victim...[McCarthy invented her own role] both coolly and professionally intellectual and frankly passionate.

(6)

But this is only true if you call sleeping with over one hundred men passionate, rather than what may have been a desperate search for a savior, as she confesses through Meg in “Ghostly Father, I Confess.” In her fiction, although her heroines do not achieve her success in life, and what I assume from Brightman’s biography, her self-esteem, they are painfully, humorously aware of their positions, and that is still a very feminist awareness.

Paul Giles is one of the few critics who has noted a connection between McCarthy and Gordon:

Tests that turn upon the axis of memory and rebellion, where rebellion can never quite erase the memory of childhood conditioning, are heirs to what we might call the Mary McCarthy tradition of Catholic existentialism. One of the most visible heirs to this tradition is the novelist Mary Gordon. It is true that Gordon's writing foregrounds the dilemmas of gender more than McCarthy does; but, like McCarthy, Gordon uneasily juggles the paradoxical oscillation between autonomous free will and religious conditioning. (514)

Although I disagree with his comment that Gordon focuses more on gender than McCarthy--the power struggle between the sexes is a strong part of McCarthy's fiction--the reluctance to trust in free will is a theme they both share. McCarthy's characters, particularly in The Group, tend to be somewhat flat as a result of this conflict, and her lack of faith in human possibility, more of a Jansenist Catholic notion than an idealistic Protestant. Once again, this conflicts with her own life where she once told an interviewer that she never wakes up without thinking of how to improve herself. It also conflicts with her concern with personal responsibility. Despite these conflicts, the doubt is still there.

Meg Sargent first thought that her ungrammatical, uncouth aunt was humorous because they differed so; but later, "she had been married some time before she knew that she sounded exactly like Aunt Clara. Yet she could not stop" (293). Whenever she attempts to be happy, or falls in love, this alien personality comes over her to destroy whatever chances she has. Isabel herself becomes a sort of Margaret when she moves in with her, but otherwise Gordon's heroines escape this overpowering domination. Why

the difference? Meg, perhaps, although angry enough to refer to Clara as Lizzie Bordon with a strap instead of an ax, becomes Clara when she does things she is ashamed of, such as crying hysterically, waking up in strange hotel rooms---Aunt Clara is merely a persona that relieves her of the responsibility of her actions. In Meg's story, McCarthy details the modern women's search for an identity through men. The entire attraction to Mr. Breen is that he might be able to tell her who she is, like the Church did, before she gave away her sense of self when she gave up "the Church's filing system, together with her aunt's illiterate morality" (101).

Mary Gordon, born several decades after McCarthy, is much more accepting of the feminist label, and this allows her characters to at least partly transcend their cultural and religious conditioning, and accept some responsibility for their actions. Feminism, she said, comes close to providing her with a "framework of values" that is as important to her as Catholicism, but "there's not the cohesion" and "anything that is modern in conception--because the modern sensibility demands change all the time--doesn't have the resonance that builds up over time" (qtd. in Schreiber 26). She sees the conflict between being both Catholic (despite her uneasy relationship with the Church) and feminist. She is often pegged as a women's writer, and she proudly agrees that she is not interested in being universal, just as she enjoys writing about the closed society of the Catholic Church as she knew it, because it would be boring to write about yuppies.

Like McCarthy, Gordon was her father's princess, and that alone may have allowed her to distance herself from the more orthodox feminist ideology: she was not raised to be a wife or mother, but to be a "secular nun" (Keyishian 76). And although she admitted that it was her father who was her hero, who made her a writer, she admits that she is the kind of writer because of her mother. "My father's taste ran to the metaphysical. My mother taught me to listen to conversations at the dinner table; she taught me to remember jokes" (Good Boys 152). Gordon has been accused by some feminists for Isabel's concern with her outward appearance, but Gordon deliberately

emphasizes Isabel's need to balance both the mind and the body in opposition to some feminists and to the Church. Yet Gordon's feminism has had a positive effect on her heroines' lives. From Isabel to Felicitas to Anne, the heroines increasingly live their lives within a community that values a woman's perspective.

Despite the claims of some critics, Gordon does not simply attack the institutional church, but lived Catholic theology. Although Paul Giles recognizes that Gordon is hostile to the Jansenist tendencies of abstractionism and dualism in her Catholicism, he dismisses her from his Catholic literary "canon" because of her feminism, and her discomfort with the fanatically religious who take these concepts to extremes, such as Laura in Men and Angels. Giles takes this as a radical feminist attack on religion, rather than recognizing the positive, human, treatment of other religious people such as Father Mulcahy in Final Payments and Jane in Men and Angels. Charles Fanning, describing The Other Side and Final Payments, argues that Gordon's feminism and anti-Catholicism lead to her angry "skewed" and "distorted" generalities of working-class Irish as anti-intellectual, and miserable. He calls The Other Side a "mean-spirited book" (Irish Voice 330). On the other hand, John Leonard wrote that the Irish-American characters hit home: "It's very cold, this Irishness. I ought to know and wish I didn't" ("Booknotes" 655). The majority of critics recognize that Gordon's focus is on how traditional roles limit both sexes. Katherine Payant remarks that Gordon's characters "live the roles dictated to them, whether Irish immigrants, or lower-middle-class, or yuppies. In keeping with the broad themes found in all of Gordon, most are not able to surmount the dictates of culture" (158). Although I agree that society, the Church, history, culture, family all have claims on the individual, Gordon's heroines are able to transcend, at least temporarily, cultural and religious limitations.

Many Catholic writers challenge the Church in their writing without necessarily losing their respect or their faith. Flannery O'Connor is one of the few who condemns moral failure in her religious characters and remains Catholic. But Mary McCarthy denied

any belief in God, and Gordon admits to losing her respect, but not her belief, though through her characters and their situations she criticizes what the Church has done to women. In her fiction, Gordon revises the Church: she is angry at its change, and angry at her sense of exclusion as a woman and a writer. She searches for substitutes for the Church that will be more accepting of her new identities: not only Catholic, but Feminist, not only a good girl, but a novelist. Her heroines come to terms with the knowledge that when they leave the confines of the Church they need to, as Isabel notes, "invent an existence" (FP 5). And for this Gordon has been accused of having self-centered heroines. Gordon updates the position of women: she has Isabel reject the role of martyr, (which she assumes even after her father dies), and Felicitas must refuse the role of priest (the isolated, cerebral being Cyp wanted her to be) in order to "embrace life as a woman" (Booth 429).

As a Catholic woman, Gordon needs to find alternative ways to commune with a spiritual being; she wants the Church to honor women as priests, and be more understanding on issues like birth control and abortion. In other words, Gordon, in her fiction, is attempting a feminist revisioning of the Catholicism, and any revisioning requires a stepping away from the status quo, a stepping away that is supported by the feminist movement.

Mary McCarthy, who shares Gordon's flair for "modern attitudinizing" (Leonard, "Saint as Kill Joy" 31), lived her life much more in the public eye than Gordon, and in many ways, is one of Gordon's mentors. Both writers share similar Irish-Catholic heritages that formed them morally and as women. Both women are seen as "women writers" and share similar themes: the struggle to recreate an identity in the absence of a church that determined it for you; the power struggle between the sexes; the dilemma of revising moral decisions that work in the modern, secular world. In many ways, Gordon's feminism allows her to update McCarthy, as her heroines make greater leaps toward self-autonomy, emancipation, and moral responsibility. McCarthy's heroines

were unable to reconcile a belief in free will with an underlying fear that free will is illusory.

The Irish-American heroine, as opposed to the hero, struggles not only with the restrictions of a conservative, authoritative culture and religion, but also with an innate misogyny that is equally potent and pervasive an influence. Uninhibited by gender restrictions and an ethic of care, the Irish-American hero can leave both church and community more easily than his female counterpart, though he, too, is often foiled by a particularly Irish-Catholic fatalism. As the Irish-American literary tradition continues to be shaped by literary critics and cultural historians, we must keep in mind that women writers will often reflect particularly female experiences that do not conform to male experiences within the same cultural and religious heritage. Critics such as Charles Fanning cannot continue to group women writers under the limiting rubric of "domestic fiction" which stereotypically blames the church for women's ills; with this criticism, he is effectively invalidating women's experiences. The Irish-American woman writer needs to work through her own experiences, creating heroines that are either hindered by or freed from the limitations of Irish-Catholicism. Thus the dutiful daughter of Irish-American fiction is often the martyr figure, rather than the falsely self-possessive alcoholic son. As Patricia Monaghan argues in response to the charge of stereotyping by Irish-American *women* writers, the Irish-American woman writer needs stereotypes like the domineering mother or the rebellious father-figure to represent what she perceives to be the only two choices she has.

Chapter Seven

Conclusion

It would make good sense to teach a course in the American Jewish Literary Experience, or American Black Literature. But a course in American Irish Literature would take up barely half a semester. You could begin, if you were a loose constructionist, with O'Neill and Fitzgerald; but the majority of their work would have to be excluded. You could go then to James T. Farrell, whose Studs Lonigan recorded --with vigor but, to my mind, with sloppiness that borders on the dime novel--the experience of the Chicago Irish in the 1920's and 30's. You would have to jump, then, to J.F. Powers's brilliant tales of 50's priests. Then you could go on to William Alfred's "Hogan's Goat," to Elizabeth Cullinan, to Maureen Howard and William Kennedy. After that, there would be nowhere to go. ("I Can't Stand Your Books" 36)

Mary Gordon's 1988 essay has been tantalizing me since the day I opened the New York Times Book Review and eagerly read what one of my favorite authors had to say about Irish-American artists. I had just begun my graduate studies when I read this essay, and what I saw as Gordon's despair over the paucity of Irish-American literature seemed to mock me incessantly as I tried to write my first graduate seminar paper: Jewish-American Black Humor in the Fiction of Bruce Jay Friedman. The irony did not escape me.

This dissertation responds to Mary Gordon in several ways: one, it identifies a recognizable Irish-American literary tradition, one that is rich enough to cover at least a semester; two, it identifies ways of reading Irish-American fiction as distinct from Protestant-American fiction, whether or not the subject matter is related to the Irish. The latter alone broadens the definition of Irish-American literature. Yet, although Gordon's

syllabi leaves out many writers, I agree that many of them have not reached the recognizable *artistic* literary achievements of a Toni Morrison or a James Baldwin, with the possible exceptions of Kate Chopin and Flannery O'Connor. But as I read the fiction of Irish-American writers, including McCarthy and Gordon, I find paragraphs that resonate days after I have read them, metaphors and images that still continue to tease my mind, memoirs so compelling, they *are* art.

The Irish-American literary tradition is influenced by a culture and a religion that are known for their indelible influence, and their "obsession with concealment." Those who attempt to write literature, according to Gordon, have the courage to risk exposing both themselves and their community's secrets. Despite this, there have been courageous writers, many of them relying on stereotypes--the drunken son, the domineering mother--trying to explain their lives to outsiders, or express their anger at their peculiar heritage. The Irish were a defeated people in England, forced to give up their language and thus separated from a literary tradition that Gordon could admire. Emigrating to the United States, where again they were persecuted, all their energy was spent in assimilating economically as quickly as possible, while still retaining their religion. In the movies and in life, the Irish-Americans became journalists, priests, prizefighters, policemen, firemen, teachers, nuns and politicians--not artists. Despite their own historical victimization, Jewish and African-American fiction flourishes, while the Irish in America have used their literary talents in non-fiction. The pre-Vatican II Irish-Catholic boy who wanted to be an artist needed to rebel from the past, not reflect on it, unless he had the genius of James Joyce. The Irish-American girl needed the influence of another culture--Kate Chopin had New Orleans, Gordon and McCarthy sought out Jewish intellectuals. Hopefully, the artistic child reared in the post-Vatican II Catholic Church, in an Irish culture much further removed from its immigrant roots, is reading Mary Gordon or Mary McCarthy's fiction, and reflecting on her past, and maybe creating art.

An in-depth cultural, religious and feminist examination of the works of only two writers within the context of the Irish-American literary tradition both opens up a canon that is already being restricted by critics, and allows for a new appreciation of their fiction. Mary Gordon is still writing, and her novels and stories continue to be read especially the latter that are reprinted widely in college anthologies particularly because of her ethnic writing. However, Mary McCarthy, despite a recent resurgence of interest in her writing following her death in 1989, and Carol Brightman's biography, was replaced by more multicultural and feminist writers on college syllabi: her writing, unlike Gordon's, is not self-consciously aware of her "ethnicity."¹ Another reason may be that McCarthy's fiction simply lacks artistic merit. Carol Brightman writes

And Mary McCarthy? What has 'passed into the language' from her pen? "The Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt," Memories of a Catholic Girlhood, a half-dozen social and cultural commentaries from On the Contrary, some pithy criticism in Theatre Chronicles ("Streetcar Called Success," "The Will and Testament of Ibsen," "General Macbeth"), The Group, by popular acclaim. I would add Venice Observed and The Stones of Florence for sheer love of finding oneself in a beautiful city that the reader discovers in each. (635)

McCarthy and Gordon are on separate sides of Vatican II, and this, as well as her closer connection to an isolated Catholic parish growing up, gives Gordon's fiction the sense of nostalgia and loss that is not as apparent in McCarthy's. McCarthy may have left the church, but it was still there, the way she always knew it, just in case. McCarthy was free to write about what she wished, because all along, in her fiction and essays, she is writing about aspects of herself, effectively making her subject matter the Irish-Catholic-

¹ This is according to Paul Lauter, editor of Reconstructing American Literature. New York: Feminist Press, 1983: 113.

American sensibility in the mid-twentieth century. A continuation of this study could include a cultural analysis of Mary McCarthy's later fiction and non-fiction. At least one current dissertation by Avis Grey Hewitt reexamines McCarthy's fiction in light of a kinder, more gentler feminist critique. Mary Gordon's fiction will continue to evolve, as it already has with the third novella in her most recent collection, also titled "The Rest of Life," where the protagonist is able to firmly (rather than ambiguously) let go of the destructive hold of the past, which includes the Church and men. Despite this glimmer of optimism, however, the anticipation of Gordon's autobiography promises a return to the material she covered in The Other Side. For Gordon, who began her career in 1978 as a published novelist writing about Irish-Americans, there may be an apprehension about future subject matter, and thus, perhaps, a clear reason for writing an autobiography. In an article on Catholics in America, she is quoted as saying, "Nobody wants to write about yuppies. . . It's much more interesting to write about a closed, slightly secret, marginal group" (Berger 65). I imagine, however, that Gordon's fiction and essays will broaden in scope, and continue, in the McCarthy tradition, to look at moral issues from a Catholic, and consciously feminist, moral perspective, as we see in several of her essays collected in Good Boys, Dead Girls.²

Imaging the Future of the Irish-American Literary Tradition

The Irish-Catholic-American literary tradition continues today with both later generations of Irish-American writers who are more conscious of cultural and religious influences, and a new wave of Irish immigrants coming to the United States since the 1980s. The immigrants coming today are young and looking to better their lives economically, but because of stricter immigration quotas, many are living here illegally; thus the alienation of the early Irish-Americans, the insulation of the second, and the continued difficulties of assimilating in the third and fourth generations, continues with the

² McCaffrey suggests, not so kindly, that Gordon should turn her attack from her Irish to the Jewish and Italian parts of her heritage. (175)

marginalization of the latest wave of Irish in America, and their literature may be similarly affected.

Of course there are and will continue to be many differences and similarities between past, contemporary and future Irish-American writers. If the Catholic Church, which in many ways holds together the Irish-American identity, continues to lose its distinction from Protestantism, the descriptions of Irish-American literature will inevitably change. Andrew Greeley has argued that Catholics should keep their writing and art within the Catholic tradition or they risk losing their true identity. Referring to Madonna's video he writes:

“Like a Prayer,” with its statues and stained glass and candles, stands for the Catholic tradition in a way a church that looks much like a Quaker meeting house cannot. The challenge for Catholic artists, barely understood thus far, is to create contemporary buildings that manifest the rich Catholic sacramental tradition and not ones that are “just like” the churches of other traditions. (Myth 56-7)

Yet there seems to be no sign that a particularly Irish-Catholic tradition is assimilating. A recent collection of Irish-American short story writers, edited by Patricia Monaghan, The Next Parish Over: A Collection of Irish-American Writing (New Rivers Press, 1993), is divided into three themes: “The Stories, Like Hidden Tongues”; “The Furies and the Silences”; and “Lost and Found Everywhere” confirming that the themes of painful, unexpressed stories, simmering anger and cultural identity are still strong.

An interesting follow up to this study would be a comparison of Irish literature by women and Irish-American women's writing. Since the 19th century, the Irish women's experience has been seen in the English-language³ fiction of Maria Edgeworth, Augusta

³ As opposed to literature in Irish (sometimes referred to as Gaelic), which has had a revival in the twentieth century in Ireland.

Gregory, Edith Somerville, Elizabeth Bowen, Kate O'Brien, Mary Lavin and Edna O'Brien.⁴ Many of these writers are considered, as are their Irish-American counterparts, domestic fiction writers. In a 1983 essay, "Irish Women and Writing in Modern Ireland" Irish journalist Nuala O'Faolain wrote that there has not been a great Irish woman writer compared to the great Irish male writers and feminist writers in Canada and the United States. Daniel and Judith Casey concur: "There are no Marilyn Frenches, Marge Piercys, or Mary Gordons writing in Athlone or Mullingar" (Casey and Casey 2). O'Faolain calls for a feminist literary tradition in Ireland. But Frances Stewart believes it already exists, that fiction by contemporary Irish women writers tends to "involve female characters who challenge orthodoxy" who are intrigued by "what disturbs, questions, offends, angers, or may even be morally and culturally subversive" (5).

It has been over ten years since the call for more feminist Irish writers, and writers such as Mary Lavin, Julia O'Faolain, Jennifer Johnston, Molly Keane, and Emma Donoghue have answered it, but whether or not their writing will resonate in the rest of the world is not yet apparent. Many are looking back to the past for their subject matter to comment on issues that are still current. Julia O'Faolain's short fiction often ridicules Irish sexual inhibitions and hypocrisies. "A Pot of Soothing Herbs"(collected in Casey and Casey) is set in 1950s Dublin. One character says, speaking of pre-1950s Irish, resonating for a 1990s Irishwoman:

I'm told the Irish were always that way--given to word games since the sixth century. It is typical of us to say "the Irish" instead of "I": a way of running for tribal camouflage. I am trying to be honest here, but I can't discard our usual rituals. In a way, that would be more dishonest. (121)

⁴ Iris Murdoch is Irish-born but is usually seen as a British writer.

Writers like Edna O'Brien expose the lives of rural Irish girls and women, but from the distance of England. In a 1976 article she explains why people continue to leave Ireland:

I had thought of how it had warped me, and those around me, and their parents before them, all stooped by a variety of fears--fear of Church, fear of gombeenism⁵, fear of phantoms, fear of ridicule, fear of hunger, fear of annihilation, and fear of their own deeply ingrained aggression that can only strike a blow at one another, not having the innate authority to strike at those who are higher. Pity arose too, pity for a land so often denuded, pity for a people reluctant to admit that there is anything wrong. That is why we leave. Because we beg to differ. Because we dread the psychological choke. (34)

However, this "psychological choke" follows the Irish emigrant as we have seen in Irish-American literature.

There are some Irish writers who are more optimistic. Emma Donoghue, whose recent book Stir Fry was briefly popular in the United States mostly because it is a lesbian coming-of-age story, may open the way for more Irish fiction by women to enter the United States. Yet even her lesbianism harks back to the then banned fiction of Kate Cruise O'Brien in the 1920s. Donoghue's novel is about a 17 year old girl who leaves her rural home for a Dublin college, and inadvertently takes a room with a lesbian couple. The book is full of Irish-Catholic references, and allusions to American popular culture (much more so than an American writer would use), but the overriding theme is not much different than McCarthy's or Gordon's: self-honesty and hypocrisy. "How honest we are until we reach the age of reason" (91) one character says. But unlike the older writers, Donoghue, who was born in the late 1960s, is much more optimistic about being a

⁵ Usury.

woman, and a lesbian, in a strictly homogenous, Catholic society. There is little reference to fatalism, but a lot about the usual relationship trouble between any couple, including a lesbian couple.

Irish literary critic Katie Donovan believes that Irish women writers still have far to go, that they must, as have Doris Lessing, Margaret Atwood and the African-American women writers in the United States, start using the first person, and not the third. They must detach themselves “from the tyranny of social or literary conventions in order to create [their] own fictive worlds” (Donovan 38). Or, as Mary Gordon recognizes, they must have the courage to be artists.

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